FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR ARISE ZHANG, ALSO KNOWN AS
FEI TIAN YE XIANG
Joyful
REUNION
BOOK FOUR

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YUAN
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Joyful Reunion

BOOK FOUR

相見歡

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Chapter 119

THIS WAS LI YANQIU'S THIRD TIME meeting the young man called Wang Shan.

In the side hall of the palace, the imperial physician treated the collapsed northern soldier as the ministers chattered noisily. Li Yanqiu hadn't slept well the previous night, and the clamor was giving him a headache. Blinding sunlight shone into the palace, and beneath that light, Duan Ling stood at Wu Du's back, peering around.

It was his first time attending such a meeting. Though not all the civil and military officials were present, nearly half of the Six Ministers were. The imperial physician placed acupuncture needles into the sick soldier from the north as Wu Du watched. While they'd been carrying the man over, he'd mumbled some things in his sleep. Wu Du had been busy looking for someone to help them, so only Duan Ling had heard him. Once Mu Kuangda received word of this, he'd asked Duan Ling to join them so he could relay what he'd heard in case the soldier didn't wake.

Cai Yan was last to arrive. The officials all fell silent, waiting for the report to begin.

"Go ahead," Li Yanqiu ordered.

Duan Ling stepped forward to feel the soldier's forehead—the man was burning up.

"Your Majesty, Your Highness," Duan Ling began. "Everyone, this man is the commander of defense in the city of Ye. He's come all the way from the north with urgent military intelligence."

"What did he say?" Xie You, the commander of the Black-Plated Army, asked.

Duan Ling gazed up at Cai Yan, seated beside the throne. The sunlight falling through the windows illuminated Cai Yan's face.

"Before he lost consciousness, he was trying to tell us what happened," Duan Ling said. "From what I gathered, around a month ago, the Yuan army surrounded Ye and launched a surprise attack at night. Our

forces were defeated. Commandant Hu sacrificed himself heroically, while the governor, Lord Lü, seems to have been captured by the enemy. His whereabouts remain unknown."

The crowd began to murmur quietly among themselves.

Mu Kuangda stood silent in thought for a moment before turning to Li Yanqiu. "This must be related to the Yuan envoy's visit. If you recall, the envoy proposed to exchange one hundred twenty li of land south of Yubi Pass for the cities of Ye and Hejian. It seems they decided to take them by force instead."

An elderly minister stepped forward. "Your Majesty, the main force of the Northern Expedition Army is guarding Yubi Pass and cannot be withdrawn to assist Ye and Hejian. We made cuts to the army's budget in early spring because of the flooding in Jiangnan and used the money to strengthen the local military forces who were rendering aid."

"Hejian and Ye are important cities for Great Chen in the north," Cai Yan said. "They sit on the border of Liao in the west and Yuan in the north. We cannot afford to lose them. Why are we receiving this report only now?!"

No one spoke.

Duan Ling glanced over at the first minister who had spoken as Mu Kuangda said, "I doubt Ögedei originally intended to take these two cities. Ye is far from the Great Wall—and though trade is not especially prosperous, the city is self-sufficient. After the military budget was cut at the start of the year, Governor Lü Zhi of Ye sent along a report, but there was no threat from the Mongols then. It's most likely they changed their plans and mobilized troops to take both cities at the same time. Wang Shan, what else did the messenger say?"

"That's all I heard," Duan Ling said, shaking his head. "If we want to know more, we must wake him up and ask him."

Even so, most of the court officials were sharp enough to piece together what had happened from those few sentences: The Yuan army had launched a surprise attack on the city of Ye, aiming for a quick victory. The governor and the commandant of the region's forces had fought desperately,

the latter sacrificing himself for his country while the former had most likely been captured and taken prisoner by their enemies.

“How many soldiers do we have at our disposal?” Li Yanqiu asked.

Su Fa, the Minister of Revenue, came forward with a bow. “Since Qixi two years past, military spending for our border armies has been slashed. As of the start of spring, the military budget supported the needs of four thousand men. Two thousand in Ye and two thousand in Hejian.”

In addition to the military pay of these four thousand soldiers, this money, after embezzlement and deductions, also provided for people residing in the governor’s and the commandant’s residences. It wasn’t cheap to support so many people. Moreover, last autumn, Li Yanqiu had granted a general amnesty, and this spring, he’d issued an order to disband the Northern Expedition Army and return the men to the fields. Within just a few months, thirty of the fifty thousand men in the Northern Expedition Army had been dismissed. Now they had no more troops to send as reinforcements.

“Lü Zhi is likely still alive,” Li Yanqiu said in a steady voice. “If we were the Mongols, we wouldn’t kill him. Keeping him as a hostage is a better way to break the morale of the Ye city garrison, and he’s still useful if they interrogate him for secrets of our border defenses.”

Everyone listened in silence.

“This matter has already been delayed for so long,” Li Yanqiu continued. “One more day won’t do any harm. Let us continue this discussion later.”

He rose, and the officials began to disperse. The whole time, Cai Yan hadn’t looked at Duan Ling once.

When the rest of the ministers had gone, Mu Kuangda and Xie You departed for the imperial study to discuss their options with Li Yanqiu. Everyone had their own concerns, whether the internal difficulties or the external threats.

The feverish soldier remained on the palace floor, gasping for breath. At a loss, Duan Ling asked Wu Du to carry him from the palace on his back. Normally the man should’ve been handed over to the Ministry of War, but with the city still flooded, each ministry was barely handling its

own people. The soldier was badly off; if they dropped him at the Ministry of War now, with no one available to take care of him, he would surely die.

“Can we take him back home and treat him?” Duan Ling asked.

“Of course,” Wu Du said, setting the soldier back into their boat.

As they made their way back to the Mu manor, they could see that the floodwaters had begun to recede. The current was no longer so fierce as before.

Chapter 120

WHEN DUAN LING AND WU DU returned home, the courtyard was no longer underwater—but it was a mess. Duan Ling settled the soldier on the divan where Wu Du often sat and treated him with acupuncture before preparing medicine to bring down his fever. They untied and removed his leather armor, discovering an arrow puncture in his thigh and knife wounds on his flank and abdomen. The wounds were inflamed and probably rotting. The soldier must've run out of medicine for his knife wounds, then gotten soaked in the rain—he was fighting both a cold and an infection.

"Wang-shaoye!" a servant shouted from outside the gate, trying to avoid crossing the water. "The exam results have been posted! The young master wanted me to let you know."

Duan Ling was already in the middle of medicine-making. "Did I pass?"

Wu Du paused in his motions to listen.

"Seventh place!" the servant called with a smile.

"Oh, good." Duan Ling was completely preoccupied with the man's condition. Soldiers generally had sturdy bodies, so he should be able to handle stronger medicine—

His nonchalance stunned the servant, but Wu Du merely smiled.

"Ah," Duan Ling said, suddenly remembering. "Should we give him a reward?"

Wu Du fished a red envelope from his robes and handed it to Duan Ling, who in turn gave it to the servant with his thanks for reporting the results. As if waking from a dream, he looked at Wu Du. "You already knew, didn't you?"

"I didn't," Wu Du said solemnly. "But I knew you would pass."

Belatedly, happiness struck Duan Ling, and he stood dazed for a moment. This probably marked the first time since the founding of the Chen

Empire that the crown prince himself had participated in the imperial examination and received such a high rank.

“But is this really because…my essay was good?” Duan Ling asked, giving it further thought. He wasn’t as exhilarated as he’d expected, perhaps because he’d already taken the makeup exam and met Li Yanqiu. Hearing the result now felt strangely anticlimactic.

“Shh.” Wu Du pointed at the soldier on the divan, reminding him to take care with what he said. He came to kneel beside Duan Ling, head tilted to peer into his eyes, and leaned closer.

Thinking he wanted to whisper something, Duan Ling leaned in too—but instead, Wu Du darted forward and kissed him. Duan Ling’s face immediately heated. Wu Du looped an arm around his waist as their lips and tongues intertwined, immersing himself in the kiss.

It was a long while later when Wu Du released him. They broke apart, both grinning. Now Duan Ling was truly brimming with happiness, and it had nothing to do with the examination or the country’s affairs. Simple joy welled up from the bottom of his heart. He’d proven himself.

Another thought occurred to Wu Du. He said with a lift of his eyebrows, “I remember you said if you passed the palace examination, you wanted to make a request. What was it?”

Duan Ling’s desires from that time came rushing back to him, and his cheeks went slightly pink. He hesitated for a long time before saying, “N-nothing.”

“The palace exam is tomorrow,” Wu Du murmured in his ear. “Afterward, I’ll teach you something.”

Duan Ling swallowed hard. He had just nerved himself to look at Wu Du again when the soldier woke with a fierce coughing fit. The pair sprang apart just as the soldier opened his eyes.

“Please… Water…”

At dusk the rain stopped, leaving the air crisp and the sky tinged red. Wind chimes jingled softly in the corridors of the Eastern Palace.

“I have a plan that may help Your Highness get rid of Wang Shan,” Feng Duo reported.

“Go ahead,” Cai Yan said.

Feng Duo held his silence for a while, organizing his thoughts and pacing across the hall before continuing. “It seems Wang Shan has passed the metropolitan examination. The palace examination is tomorrow. Whether he scores among the top three doesn’t matter—either way, he’s already been recognized as a gongshi.”

He looked up at Cai Yan, his gaze piercing. He’d never asked any unnecessary questions, but Cai Yan looked away regardless, uncomfortable.

“If we wish to eliminate him, we must arrange an accident,” Feng Duo said. “It cannot happen in the capital. The farther from here, the better.”

“Agreed,” Cai Yan said. “Continue.”

“If he places among the top three in the palace examination—the ranks zhuangyuan, bangyan, or tanhua—we will have a perfect opportunity.”

“Oh?”

“As a top scholar, he will have two choices. He may enter the Hanlin Academy or be assigned to serve as an official. This is how it’s been done for hundreds of years. I’ve read this young man’s exam papers—Your Highness, you must advise His Majesty that Wang Shan is most suitable for bringing peace to the country through hands-on governance, and it would therefore be a waste for him to remain here in the Hanlin Academy. This way, we can easily push him from the city.”

“A very good idea,” Cai Yan said. The dismal haze around him seemed to evaporate as if a ray of light had blazed through, and he laughed. “He can be appointed as a county magistrate. Then we’ll simply send the shadow squad to kill him there! It’s decided.”

“But Wu Du must remain in the capital,” Feng Duo cautioned. “He cannot be allowed to follow him.”

Cai Yan mulled this problem over, then slowly shook his head. “Wu Du won’t agree to it. He’ll go with Wang Shan for sure.” He caught Feng

Duo's suspicious gaze and clarified, "Wu Du has a disagreeable and unsociable personality. He has always refused to be ruled. He still hasn't received an official position because of this."

"What about having Prime Minister Mu create a reason to keep Wu Du behind?"

Cai Yan frowned. "If Wu Du accompanies Wang Shan, can he still be killed?"

"In that case, it will depend on Wuluohou Mu's cooperation," Feng Duo replied. "But if we send Wang Shan to an area he and Wu Du are both unfamiliar with, they'll have a harder time guarding against us. What's more, since they will no longer be under Mu Kuangda's watchful eye, even if we make several attempts, no one at court will be suspicious. If we place him in Jiao Prefecture, say, where the wokou pirates are active, no one will think twice if he dies."

Relief washed through Cai Yan. As long as he threw Duan Ling into some deserted place and sent the shadow squad after him, he could try as many times as it took. No matter how cautious he and Wu Du were, there were only two of them.

"If Wu Du follows him, how confident are you that you can finish the job?" Cai Yan asked.

"Completely confident," Feng Duo replied. "But Wu Du must die too, lest he find out who ordered Wang Shan's death and seek revenge."

"Then I will leave this matter to you."

Feng Duo bowed himself out, and Cai Yan sat alone in the hall. The sunlight, dim now, seemed to hesitate as it crept across the floor.

Night descended. Wu Du helped the injured soldier sit up and lean against the divan as Duan Ling fed him spoonfuls of medicinal porridge. That he'd survived at all was a miracle. His name, he explained, was Sun Ting; he was a native of Ye and had joined the army at the age of sixteen, ten years ago. When the troops mobilized, he'd followed Li Jianhong to fight.

Later on, when Li Jianhong was stripped of his command and the Northern Expedition Army reorganized, Sun Ting had been transferred back to Ye to defend the border. The Hebei region—which included Ye, Hejian, and Chang—had been at peace for several years until last month, when the Yuan army had attacked without warning. Ye had put up a valiant defense against the ten thousand soldiers at their gates and paid a terrible price.

"Who led the troops?" Duan Ling asked.

"A Mongol named Khurcha."

Duan Ling had never heard of him. "Whose subordinate is he?"

"Ögedei's," Sun Ting said. "But the army's already gone—they attacked the city and left the same night."

This was the Mongols' way: They swept along the Great Wall raiding cities, leaving no grass untrampled and scorching all the villages they passed through. They took what food they could and slaughtered everyone in their path.

"They'll be back," Duan Ling said with a frown. "And the court has no more troops to send back with you."

"What should I do? If Ye falls, Hejian and Chang will be next. Hebei will fall under the control of the Mongols!"

"What about the governor? What happened to him?" Duan Ling asked.

Sun Ting shook his head—he didn't know.

Duan Ling spoke a few more comforting words and helped him lie down, promising he would take him back to see the emperor the following day.

That night, the sky was clear as far as the eye could see. Duan Ling couldn't sleep. Brows locked in a frown, he sat outside the door, leaning against Wu Du and wondering what he should do about Ye.

The court wasn't sitting around idle—there truly was no army to send. If the defensive troops at Yubi Pass were withdrawn, the Khitan would seize the opportunity to attack. The court ministers would certainly lament that if only they'd known about this situation earlier, they would've

agreed to the Yuan envoy's request and traded Ye and Hejian away to avoid such a headache.

"Should we ask Xie You to send troops to Ye to stabilize the situation?" Wu Du suggested.

"No, that won't do," Duan Ling replied. "We need to speak to Han Bin at Yubi Pass."

"Who?" Wu Du asked.

Duan Ling looked at him incredulously. "Have you already forgotten? Han Bin was the Tiger General of the Northern Expedition Army who betrayed my… The previous emperor."

That jogged Wu Du's memory. Back before they had set out for Tong Pass, Mu Kuangda had merely mentioned this name in passing—but Duan Ling had never forgotten. Han Bin and Bian Lingbai were once trusted lieutenants of the Northern Expedition Army under Li Jianhong's command; naturally, Han Bin would be familiar with the state of things on the border. After Zhao Kui's death, when the border defense had been mobilized, only Han Bin had been able to properly fight their enemies to the north. Xie You's army held fifty thousand men, but they were all soldiers from the south. In the short term their help would be useful, but in the long term, they wouldn't succeed in unfamiliar terrain against their enemies in the north.

There had originally been six cities in Hebei. Since the Treaty of Shangzi, Liao held Shangzi, Tong, and Huqiu, while Chang, Ye, and Hejian belonged to Southern Chen. Later, after Liao was defeated by Yuan the year Kuchi left Shangjing, their three Hebei cities had fallen to Yuan as well.

Hebei had a forgotten name…and Duan Ling intended to keep that land, no matter what.

He fell asleep slumped against Wu Du.

The next morning, Sun Ting shook him awake.

"Shaoye," Sun Ting said. "Are we seeing the emperor today? If I can't meet with him, then I need to start making my way home."

Sun Ting's family was still back in Ye. He'd been to Xichuan once before and knew how things in the capital worked. He had no money to grease palms. He couldn't go to the Ministry of War or the Ministry of Revenue—much less presume to beg an audience with the emperor. Even if he remained waiting in the capital for the next five years, he'd have no chance of meeting with him.

Duan Ling yawned. "What time is it?"

Wu Du was training with his sword in the courtyard. "Still early," he said. "Get up and eat some breakfast."

Duan Ling turned to Sun Ting. "Wait here. I'll be going into the palace for the examination today. Afterward, I'll get you an answer no matter what. You'll be free to leave after we hear their decision."

Sun Ting hadn't expected that Duan Ling would be a scholar—possibly even a future top scholar—and he hurriedly bowed. Duan Ling didn't dare accept such an honor, and politely returned the greeting. Given that Sun Ting had once been his own father's subordinate, Duan Ling felt he was familiar in a way—not to mention, Sun Ting was much older than him.

Once he'd finished his breakfast, Wu Du escorted Duan Ling to the entrance of Yinghe Hall, where he was once again stopped by the Black-Plated guards.

"Today's the palace examination. If you have no business here, move along," a soldier said.

Wu Du's temper instantly flared. He barked a furious laugh. "Is that so—"

Duan Ling, afraid Wu Du would reach for his poison and bring disaster upon the entire Black-Plated Army, hurriedly said, "It's fine. I'll just go in."

The second Wu Du raised a hand, the two guards shrank back in fear—they had obviously received a warning about him beforehand. Yet Wu Du only placed his palm on the back of Duan Ling's neck, pressed their foreheads together, and whispered, "I'll ask for an audience and wait for you in the palace."

“All right,” Duan Ling agreed, nodding.

Even if Cai Yan had extraordinary capabilities, he wouldn’t attempt anything during the palace examination. Duan Ling and Wu Du exchanged another glance. Wu Du waved, then pointed toward his own chest, reminding him that he still had something to protect himself. Duan Ling nodded and followed a guard inside.

Chapter 121

THE SQUARE OUTSIDE THE HALL was packed with examination candidates. A scholar from the Hanlin Academy called out names. Huang Jian, the other young man Mu Kuangda had sponsored for the exams, nodded when he spotted Duan Ling. “You’re here!”

“You’re here too,” Duan Ling said, returning the nod. He stamped his thumbprint on the paper to mark himself present.

“Where’s our teacher?” Huang Jian asked.

Duan Ling had been so preoccupied the day before that he hadn’t even thought about the exam or asked how the others had scored. Everyone had been so busy their feet had barely touched the ground; Mu Kuangda had stayed in the palace all night. Duan Ling related all this to Huang Jian as they strode over to one side of the space to chat. Soon after, two more scholars approached Huang Jian. They smiled at Duan Ling.

“My shidi,” Huang Jian said, introducing Duan Ling to the other two.

Duan Ling took a step back and bowed politely, and the other two returned the greeting.

“This is Qin Xuguang and Zeng Yongnuo,” Huang Jian said, gesturing to each in turn.

Qin Xuguang appeared to be in his thirties, while Zeng Yongnuo was a few years younger. Among the four, Qin Xuguang was the oldest, so everyone addressed him as *Qin-xiong*. Both men spoke politely to Huang Jian and Duan Ling.

Huang Jian’s father had been the Imperial Salt Censor; when Duan Ling’s grandfather had occupied the throne, the man had been an important official of Southern Chen. Late in his career, he had been accused of corruption and ultimately died in prison. It was Mu Kuangda who, many years later, overturned the verdict and allowed his son Huang Jian to come study in Jiang Prefecture. After ten years of hard work and studying, Huang Jian had finally stepped into the palace examination, where the nation’s best scholars competed for top place.

Qin Xuguang, meanwhile, was the son of Hui Prefecture's magistrate. His parents were still alive; his hope was to come to the capital, take the examination, and become an official. Zeng Yongnuo had been born to a salt merchant family in Jiangnan—and so he was barely even on Duan Ling's level, who was at least nominally the son of a merchant physician. After everyone exchanged pleasantries, Huang Jian turned to Duan Ling. "You said a messenger from the border arrived in the capital yesterday?"

"That's right," Duan Ling said.

This matter had troubled him so deeply his face had been set in a frown since the previous night, his brows perpetually drawn together. Duan Ling explained what he'd learned, and the other three nodded along. In a sense, it was rather amusing: The entire court—civil and military officials alike—had no idea what to do and instead, a group of examination candidates were the ones worrying over the country's affairs.

"What do you think, Huang-shixiong?" Duan Ling asked.

"Our teacher must have a plan. I'm sure we'll hear from him today."

Duan Ling guessed that Huang Jian didn't want to express too much of his opinion in front of others, lest he be seen as criticizing the emperor.

"Come find me after the exam," Huang Jian said. "I have something else to discuss with you."

"Once the palace examination is over, we should all get to know each other better," Zeng Yongnuo said, smiling.

"Of course." Duan Ling returned his smile, thinking privately that the others were getting the better half of the bargain.

"I heard there's a restaurant in Jiang Prefecture called World's Best Noodle Shop," Qin Xuguang said. "What a name! Why don't we book a private room and try it tonight?"

Duan Ling thought to himself, *You can't just get a room. It's actually pretty exclusive…*

A bell rang inside, and he quickly agreed to make plans after the exam before following everyone into Yinghe Hall.

There were one hundred twelve candidates, and when they all surged forward at once, they made a great commotion; there was no space left

outside the hall. Normally, they should have bathed, meditated, burned incense, and prayed before entering the palace. In these unprecedented times, however—with the ongoing flooding and the city still a mess—all rituals were waived. The early summer air was hot and stuffy, which made the crowd of candidates shift uncomfortably as they waited to get out of the heat.

As the group formed their line, Zheng Yan appeared from a side door and whistled toward Duan Ling. “This way!”

Duan Ling was struck speechless.

“Hurry up,” Zheng Yan said. “I’ll get scolded if His Majesty finds out.”

Duan Ling scurried over under the assembled crowd’s gaze, and Zheng Yan shooed him through a shortcut into the exam hall.

Hundreds of tables had been neatly arranged in the hall, a rather magnificent sight. As soon as Duan Ling entered, he spotted Wu Du standing behind a pillar. Duan Ling smiled, about to call out, when Wu Du shushed him. He pointed at one of the tables, indicating he should sit.

Duan Ling breathed out in relief and took his seat. Some time later, another figure strolled through the side door: Mu Qing.

“There you are,” Mu Qing said. “I told the servants to bring you to the palace earlier to avoid the line. How come you only got here now?”

“I sent them away so he could sleep a little more,” Wu Du said.

“You stayed in the palace last night?” Duan Ling asked Mu Qing.

“Yeah,” Mu Qing said. “I brought some pastries for you. My aunt said we’ll definitely get number one if we eat them.”

Duan Ling laughed heartily. Mu Qing handed him a paper bag with a fish-shaped peach blossom pastry inside. It was supposed to represent the carp jumping over the Dragon Gate—a symbol of achieving success after much struggle. They split the treat in half; Duan Ling took the fish’s head, and Mu Qing kept the tail.

“I don’t need to get number one,” Duan Ling said, smiling. “Number two is good enough.”

As Mu Qing and Duan Ling grinned at each other, Duan Ling noticed someone else approaching.

Lang Junxia.

He strode into the palace examination hall with Chilling Edge unsheathed in hand. The two young men fell silent. Lang Junxia stopped behind one of the pillars and took his place there in silence. He cast a glance over at Duan Ling, his eyes falling on Duan Ling's left wrist.

Duan Ling tugged down his sleeve to cover the red acacia-bead bracelet Wu Du had given him.

Lang Junxia's expression remained unchanged. He stared at Duan Ling quietly for a moment before turning his gaze away. Duan Ling could almost sense what he was thinking—he must've been looking for the prayer beads he'd given Duan Ling, but Duan Ling had hardly worn them since he'd received them at Tong Pass.

"Where's Changliu-jun?" Zheng Yan asked.

"When I passed the imperial study earlier, he was still inside. He'll probably be late," Lang Junxia replied.

The second bell rang to announce the proctor's arrival. A gust of wind swept into the hall—and with it Changliu-jun, masked and dressed in black.

"We're all here. How rare," Wu Du said.

"I'm here to supervise the examination," Changliu-jun said. He flicked a glance at Duan Ling and Mu Qing. "Good luck."

The four great assassins each stood before a corner pillar, monitoring the entire hall. Only then did Duan Ling realize *they* were serving as the day's proctors.

On the third bell, the palace doors opened, and the rest of the examination candidates filed in. Each found a desk and sat down. Zheng Yan and Changliu-jun watched their every move to ensure nobody was cheating. Lang Junxia seemed distracted; his gaze remained locked on Duan Ling. Noticing his attention, Wu Du cut several glances over at him. Across the distance between their opposite corners, they stared at one another until Lang Junxia averted his eyes.

Soon enough, the main doors opened. Morning sunlight filtered in. A eunuch's voice sang out, "The emperor has arrived!"

The examinees knelt in unison, chanting, "Long live His Majesty!"

The golden hems of Li Yanqiu's imperial robe fluttered as he strode through the hall, trailing a breeze. He took his seat on the throne. "You may rise."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," the examinees chorused. They rose and sat back down behind their desks.

Li Yanqiu's eyes swept across the examination hall until they landed on Duan Ling's face. "Begin."

A member of the Grand Secretariat unfolded a piece of paper and read aloud: "We have heard that great governance of the world originates from the Dao and begins with virtue."

The hall fell silent as the candidates held their breath and listened.

"However, the rafters holding up our court are rotted through; our people, dead or starving, litter the wild; and war rages at the frontiers…"

Duan Ling's heart leapt into his throat. At once, he understood what Li Yanqiu sought—his sorrow was reflected in this palace examination question.

"Having heard this, present your answer without holding anything back."

The hall was so silent one could hear a pin drop. The eunuch sang again, "Farewell to the emperor—"

The examinees stood, knelt once more, and cried, "Long live His Majesty!"

Li Yanqiu left. The minister from the Grand Secretariat asked everyone to rise and begin their essays.

The emperor's choice of examination question implied that there were both internal and external problems facing the nation, but that despite having done his utmost, he was without a solution. Great Chen was in turmoil, the court was near collapse, the people were starving, and the foreign tribes of the north were encroaching on their borders. Who could

save the emperor? Who could save Great Chen? This was the question the candidates had to answer to the best of their ability, and with total honesty.

After the minister made his exit, Zheng Yan announced solemnly, “Everyone, you are the future of Great Chen. Please do not discuss your answers among yourselves. If blood is spilled here today, it will be difficult to explain to His Majesty.”

Duan Ling laughed under his breath, then smoothed out a piece of paper and dipped his brush in ink. He wrote his first line: *All under heaven belongs to the emperor, and all the people are his subjects*.

The Chen Empire’s problem, at its core, was one of territory and land. For many years now the Treaty of Shangzi had been a source of insult, and the frequent invasions from the foreign tribes in the north had nearly depleted Great Chen of resources. The same old issues plagued the south: The nobility used their power to encroach on the common people’s farmland, while without a means to make a living, the commoners fell into destitution. The class division—the gap between rich and poor—had grown into a yawning chasm. The land must be redistributed, and the court’s first priorities must be keeping their enemies out and maintaining peace within the country.

Time passed quickly. Initially Duan Ling had thought to rewrite the answer he’d given for his first examination, but after serious thought, he began instead from the Battle of Shangjing two years ago.

Why did my father die, and who killed him?

If the late emperor were still alive, would we be in the same predicament today?

Over the two intervening years, Duan Ling had learned much. Rationally, he now understood the arguments of those who had opposed his father. Even after so many years of fighting, the nation continued to dispatch the army north to fight against foreign enemies, but this only extended the war ever onward. The moment they reached a peace with the Liao Empire, Great Yuan was knocking at their door.

He recognized his father’s great achievements, and he admired them as much as ever—but he also saw with clear eyes the famines in the Central

Plains, Xichuan’s weak position when the court had been there, and the conservative attitudes of the Jiang Prefecture nobles.

While Great Chen needed someone like his father to drive it forward, it also required someone who could maintain the carriage in repair so it wouldn’t fall apart under the impacts of the road.

Duan Ling was finally beginning to understand the expectations Li Jianhong had placed on him. Calling him *Your Majesty* hadn’t been a joke. Duan Ling had been a light in the darkness, a boat that had carried his father across the vast, tumultuous river. When he was alive, his father could only carry on fighting; it was his duty and his destiny. Only death had stopped him.

And now Duan Ling’s duty was here, on this paper.

Wu Du’s voice suddenly rang out from the northwest corner: “Why do you keep looking at him?”

All the examinees paused, Duan Ling included. Nobody said a word, or knew whom Wu Du was addressing.

“Look at him again, and I’ll draw my sword,” Wu Du said. His voice echoed through the silent hall.

Everyone’s hearts raced, wondering if they were about to witness the spilled blood Zheng Yan had promised. After some time passed and Wu Du didn’t speak again, they ducked their heads and resumed writing.

Chapter 122

As the exam went on, the Four Great Assassins began to patrol the hall, each picking his own path through the tables.

The palace examination was set to last for nearly the entire day. As noon approached, the temperature in the hall rose. Maids placed wooden cups filled with tea on the candidates' tables and went around with trays of snacks. Though Duan Ling was terribly thirsty, he didn't dare drink. A pair of boots stopped next to him, and someone bent to place a cup of water on his table, removing the original cup. Duan Ling looked up the man's long legs and saw that it was Wu Du. He drank the water.

Wu Du poured him a refill, but Duan Ling didn't dare drink any more, in case he needed to relieve himself. He picked up his brush and resumed drafting his essay. As he wrote, he lost track of time, immersed in memories of the past and the distant impressions they'd left on him. The memorials piled high in Mu Kuangda's study, the citizens who'd fled… All of it rushed back to him. His tears fell, dripping onto the paper as his brush moved across it; the damp spots bled the ink on the final word of his essay.

He lifted his sleeve, wiped his face dry of tears, and set down his brush with a sigh of relief. The palace examination essay seemed to have drained all his strength.

In that moment, his heart was perfectly serene. He sat there quietly. As the sun dipped low in the west, spilling its ruddy golden rays into the hall, the fourth bell rang. Only when the ministers of the Grand Secretariat came to collect their papers did Duan Ling let out a breath of relief. He raised his head and froze.

Cai Yan was seated in an elevated chair at the front of the hall. Duan Ling hadn't noticed him arrive.

They faced one another. Cai Yan was staring intently at him. Once Duan Ling's initial shock passed and he regained his composure, he smiled slightly at Cai Yan, who smiled back, some unfathomable emotion hidden in his eyes.

“Thank you for your hard work, everyone,” Cai Yan said.

The examinees all bowed to the crown prince, then lifted their hems and knelt. Standing among his fellow examinees in the hall, Duan Ling stared at Cai Yan, unmoving. A few breaths later, he straightened his robes and knelt fluidly as well, prostrating himself on the ground.

“Rise,” Cai Yan said.

“Candidates,” the eunuch with him said. “Please go to the side hall and enjoy dinner before leaving.”

Cai Yan exited the hall. As the examinees sighed and mopped their brows, Duan Ling went straight to Zheng Yan. “I’d like an audience with His Majesty to discuss something.”

“Wu Du already mentioned it,” Zheng Yan said. “Come to the door of the imperial study later. I’ll bring you in.”

Duan Ling glanced across the hall and noticed Lang Junxia was still lingering inside, speaking to a member of the Grand Secretariat.

“Lord Wuluohou,” Duan Ling called. “I have something I’d like to discuss with you too. Please meet me in the corridor.”

Lang Junxia raised his brows a fraction in surprise.

Duan Ling left Yinghe Hall and stepped into the corridor behind it, where Wu Du sat against the railing, drinking water as he waited for Duan Ling.

“Let’s go get something to eat,” Wu Du said.

“In a minute,” Duan Ling replied, taking a seat beside him.

“How’d you do?” Wu Du asked. Noting that Duan Ling looked off, he thought perhaps he hadn’t performed well.

Duan Ling was still sunk in memories of the past. At Wu Du’s question, he flashed a smile and whispered, “You said before that you would take me to lots of places.”

“I will,” Wu Du replied. “We’ll go, even if you want to leave tonight. Why? What made you think of that?”

They gazed quietly at each other. Duan Ling could feel Wu Du’s steady presence, a reassuring anchor at his side. “I want to go to Ye,” he

said.

“Then let’s go,” Wu Du said. “Tonight? I’ll make the preparations.”

Wu Du didn’t ask his reasons—as if, so long as it was Duan Ling’s decision, he would accept it unconditionally.

“You’re not going to ask why?”

“If you can defend Tong Pass, then you can defend Ye too.”

Duan Ling knew it wasn’t that simple. Last time he’d gone along merely to help assassinate Bian Lingbai; defending Tong Pass in the process had been pure luck. He was familiar with the art of war in theory, but leading troops onto a battlefield was another beast entirely.

At that moment, Lang Junxia stepped into the corridor.

“He’s here,” Wu Du said.

Duan Ling lifted his head and gazed at Lang Junxia as he advanced. He looked just the same as Duan Ling remembered, as if he never changed: handsome and graceful, like a beautiful piece of jade.

Duan Ling stood and took a slow step forward to meet him.

“What is it?” Lang Junxia asked.

“I have something to say,” Duan Ling said.

The time that had passed between them seemed to solidify as they gazed at each other in silence. Lang Junxia’s lips moved, but before he could speak, a crisp *crack* echoed through the still night—Duan Ling had raised his hand and slapped him.

The impact turned Lang Junxia’s head to the side, leaving a scarlet mark on his cheek.

“That woman was someone from your tribe,” Duan Ling began, his voice low. “An old woman who was taken first to Xichuan and then to Jiang Prefecture. She doesn’t speak Han and can’t talk to her neighbors—she’s alone and helpless. You’re her only support, but you ignored her. You gave her some money and didn’t even ask anyone to look after her or speak with her. Do you know how I can tell?”

Wu Du stepped up behind Duan Ling in case Lang Junxia decided to make a move, but Lang Junxia stood wordless, as still as stone.

“During the flood, everyone else nearby evacuated,” Duan Ling whispered. “But nobody rescued her. Everyone knew she was your relative, and they ignored her because they didn’t want to bring trouble down on their own heads. She had nobody to look after her—no friends, no family, no human affection. Isn’t it obvious why? If she can’t talk to anyone, she can’t spill your secrets, right?”

Lang Junxia said nothing.

“That’s why I struck you. Remember it.”

Duan Ling turned and took a few steps down the corridor, then looked back. “I understand why you don’t want others to speak to her. But I’m telling you now—you’d better treat her well, or when I enter the court as an official, the first thing I’ll do is report you for being disloyal, unfilial, unkind, unjust, and unworthy of your post. Not to mention you were the one who put *him* up there. Even if you were the emperor himself, you wouldn’t escape blame.”

Lang Junxia remained standing in the corridor, alone, as the moon rose in the evening sky.

Even after they passed the imperial garden, Duan Ling's hands were still trembling from the slap.

"Fuck, so brave—even I was scared by that slap," Wu Du said. "What was that about?"

"I was…really angry," Duan Ling replied. "Especially after I saw Feilian sitting all by herself on that terrace."

Wu Du and Changliu-jun already knew the truth, but nobody wanted to acknowledge it. This was why no one liked Lang Junxia.

"He's always been heartless and disloyal. That's why…" Wu Du fell silent, then changed the subject. "Are you hungry? It won't be Zheng Yan's cooking today. Mu Qing asked me to take you to the empress's palace to eat instead. Let's go."

Duan Ling's hands still quivered gently. Wu Du took one to hold, allowing Duan Ling's heart to slowly calm. The words left unsaid echoed in Duan Ling's mind: Lang Junxia was heartless and disloyal, and so he—who had been raised by Lang Junxia—was heartless and disloyal as well.

But wasn't that how an assassin was supposed to be? Comparatively, Wu Du didn't seem like an assassin. Duan Ling hadn't seen Zheng Yan kill anyone yet, so that was hard to judge—perhaps he, too, was a ruthless person. Changliu-jun certainly had no qualms when it came to killing.

Was Lang Junxia truly heartless? Duan Ling couldn't help thinking back to when he was a child—to that snowy night in Shangjing, when Lang Junxia had lain seriously injured on the divan. Countless fragments of memory intertwined. He was certain Lang Junxia did, indeed, have a heart.

When his father had come and Lang Junxia had left, Duan Ling had clung to him; he hadn't wanted Lang Junxia to go.

In a flash, years had passed. The slap he'd just delivered seemed to have also knocked away Duan Ling's pent-up anger. When he thought about the past now, his heart felt empty. *If I receive everything that is rightfully mine in the future, will I kill him—will I grant him death?*

Duan Ling had never considered the question before, but he couldn't stop thinking about it now. Clearly, when the time came, Lang Junxia had to die—whether or not he held the blade himself. Even if Duan Ling granted him a pardon, the court officials would want to extract their pound of flesh. He didn't want to see Lang Junxia die in front of him. If someone killed him quietly and told Duan Ling he'd gone missing or escaped—even that would be better. It was as if, so long as he didn't have to witness Lang Junxia's death, his memories could remain untouched. The short-lived happiness he'd enjoyed in the new world Lang Junxia had brought him into after leaving Runan wouldn't seem like such a joke.

Duan Ling and Wu Du swiftly arrived at the empress's palace. Upon seeing them, the empress, Mu Jinzhi, called out, "You must be Wang Shan. Qing-er talks about you so much these days my ears must be calloused from it."

Duan Ling hurried to greet the empress.

"No need to stand on ceremony with me; you're a member of the Mu household," she said. "Go ahead and eat your dinner. Qing-er complained of a headache after the exam, so we've just sent him off to sleep. He asked us to wake him when you arrived."

"Please don't wake him yet," Duan Ling said. "Let him sleep a little longer."

"That's what I said." Mu Jinzhi smiled, then said to Wu Du, "You should go take your dinner too."

Wu Du nodded, but he didn't leave for the side hall where his dinner was laid, instead watching Duan Ling eat. Mu Jinzhi didn't insist; she sat on the divan, observing a maid as she drew on the surface of a small revolving lantern with brush and ink.

"How is your home?" Mu Jinzhi asked. "Was it flooded?"

"Everything is well enough," Duan Ling replied.

"Whenever you're free, do persuade your laoye to eat his meals on time. Without Chang Pin by his side, nobody is there to remind him."

Duan Ling agreed, then shot a look at Wu Du, silently raising his brows. Mu Jinzhi might've been talking about Mu Kuangda, but Duan Ling

knew Wu Du would get the hint—*You heard what she said. Laoye should eat too.*

Shaking his head, Wu Du left for the side hall to eat his dinner, keeping his ears pricked for any noise in the next room.

Duan Ling glanced at Mu Jinzhi's belly, but couldn't tell anything from sight.

"Wang Shan, are you married yet?" she asked.

Duan Ling had already guessed that many people would want to play matchmaker for a young and promising scholar, and had prepared an answer in advance. He demurred, "I'm afraid not. I'm destined for a hard life."

"Are you? You'd never know it," she replied. She laughed. Nudging a maid with her round fan, she said, "Take a look at Wang Shan. Why do I think he looks like someone I know?"

The maid examined him. After some thought, she said softly, "The corners of his mouth do look a bit like the fifth princess's."

Duan Ling offered them a small smile, his heart thumping. *Their eyes are so sharp—but it should be fine, right?*

Fortunately, he was saved from responding by the arrival of a new guest: Zheng Yan, who had presumably come to fetch Duan Ling and Wu Du for their requested audience.

As he excused himself and followed Zheng Yan out, the thought belatedly occurred to him—Chang Pin wasn't with Mu Kuangda. Now that he thought about it, he hadn't seen the man for several days. Where had he gone? Where would Mu Kuangda send him at such a critical time?

The lamps were still burning in the imperial study, and a light coughing sounded from within. Duan Ling felt a moment's worry about Li Yanqiu's health. The emperor had a weak constitution, and after several days busying himself with urgent government affairs, Duan Ling could only hope he hadn't taken truly ill. If they had time, he should ask Wu Du to look him over. Hopefully Mu Kuangda or Cai Yan wasn't poisoning him.

As if summoned by the thought, a maid came just at that moment with a tray of medicine. Thinking quickly, Duan Ling stuck his foot out,

and the girl yelped and fell onto him, spilling medicine down his robes.

“I’m so sorry!” he exclaimed.

She quickly assured him it was fine and knelt to pick up the broken shards of porcelain before leaving to brew the medicine again. Duan Ling sniffed at the medicine on his clothes, but he couldn’t determine anything from it. He glanced at Wu Du, who nodded minutely in understanding.

“Who’s outside?” Li Yanqiu asked.

“Wang Shan and Wu Du have requested an audience, Your Majesty,” Zheng Yan replied.

“Send them in.”

Duan Ling exchanged a look with Wu Du, then stepped into the study.

“You still have yet to join our court,” Li Yanqiu said with a glance at Wu Du behind him, “yet you call on me more frequently than the prime minister.”

“Though my position is lowly,” Duan Ling replied, “I dare not forget my duty to our country.”

“We read your essay,” Li Yanqiu said slowly. “In all these years, yours is the only essay that has stirred us so—reading it, we could not help but be moved to sorrow.”

Duan Ling lifted his eyes to meet Li Yanqiu’s, and saw they were red at the rims, as if he was truly touched.

Chapter 123

“RELATIVES MAY MOURN ME, but others raise voices in song; what is there to say of death, when one’s body will turn to soil?”[1] A slight smile crossed Duan Ling’s lips as he finished his recitation. “Your Majesty, please have a care with your health. When I learned the late emperor had passed, I felt as if the sky had fallen and the earth collapsed. But—slowly, I learned to live with my grief.”

Li Yanqiu gazed quietly at Duan Ling, his eyes still red. Finally, he said, “What kind of person do you think the late emperor was? Wu Du was with him near the end. We imagine he’s told you stories.”

Even after taking a moment to think, Duan Ling couldn’t find adequate words to describe his father. He had been wise and brave, gentle and patient…like a towering mountain, always guiding him. No matter how far Duan Ling walked, or how long it took him, he would always see that lofty peak before him when he lifted his head.

As for what had left the deepest impression on him… Duan Ling ultimately said, “I think he was a fascinating man.”

Li Yanqiu chuckled. “You’re right; he was indeed a fascinating man.”

Duan Ling laughed too. Those two words encompassed Li Jianhong completely; nothing more was needed.

“Being fascinating is much harder than securing great achievements and leaving the mark of one’s name in history.” Li Yanqiu sighed. “The world is vast, yet we cannot find another like him. Nonetheless—we always take great pleasure in speaking with you.”

“I’m pleased to speak with you as well, Your Majesty.”

Li Yanqiu smiled. From outside the study, Zheng Yan called, “Your Majesty, your medicine’s here.”

Before Li Yanqiu could give any orders, Duan Ling took it upon himself to open the door. He accepted the medicine and presented it to the

emperor. When Li Yanqiu took the bowl, Duan Ling reached out to take his wrist. Li Yanqiu glanced at him, but said nothing as he drank the medicine.

Duan Ling focused on the pulse under his fingers. It didn't seem like Li Yanqiu was actively being poisoned—at the very least, his pulse was normal. But he was inherently feeble; his vitality and blood were deficient, and his heart was weak. The medicine he took was necessary to calm his nerves and strengthen his heart.

Of course, Duan Ling's quick diagnosis wasn't necessarily reliable. Only Wu Du could confirm whether or not he was truly being poisoned. A physician diagnosing a patient must look, smell, ask, and feel—all things Wu Du could achieve even by seeing Li Yanqiu occasionally. The effects of slow poisons normally showed on the victim's face, so Wu Du ought to have noticed if something were amiss.

Duan Ling had roughly guessed the outline of Mu Kuangda's plan: Most likely, Mu Jinzhi had arranged for Li Yanqiu to use the same medicine every day, until he didn't think twice about it. When the time was right to make their move, they would simply add poison to the dose. Any deleterious effects would take time to be detected and traced. If poison was added two or three times over a long period, Li Yanqiu likely wouldn't even notice.

Duan Ling released Li Yanqiu's wrist and nodded. He didn't explain, and Li Yanqiu didn't ask.

"If you hadn't mentioned the late emperor in your palace examination, I would have given you first place." Li Yanqiu finished drinking his medicine, his brow furrowed. "But since you used his name for your own purposes, I can only give you third—the rank of tanhua."

Duan Ling smiled, lifted his robe, and knelt in front of Li Yanqiu to thank him.

"Go tell Wu Du," Li Yanqiu said. "You can return to your hometown and bring honor to your family."

"Your Majesty, I have one more thing I wish to ask," Duan Ling said, still kneeling.

"Speak."

“The city of Ye on our northern border is in dire need of help, but there are no troops to send—”

“Tanhua,” Li Yanqiu said with a smile, “we haven’t even posted the announcement yet.”

His tone was so similar to Li Jianhong’s. Duan Ling could tell Li Yanqiu was in a good mood and merely teasing him. He solemnly continued, “I am willing to travel to Ye to shoulder this burden on Your Majesty’s behalf.”

Li Yanqiu was stunned; his brows drew together once more.

Duan Ling rose at last. He took a seat before the low table and selected a brush to dip in ink. With a few easy strokes, he sketched a map of the area around Ye and added a dotted line above it, signifying the Great Wall.

“The Yuan army looted Ye,” Duan Ling explained, “but they couldn’t hold the city. We’re heading into summer now, when the Mongols are most active in their campaigns. Normally, their aim is to plunder the city, not capture it; therefore, their path of retreat should go northwest from Ye, along the Great Wall. If they move as expected, we should receive news from the three western cities of Changrong, Jintai, and Jibei within the next few months. The Mongols will travel along the border between Liao and Chen, plundering and retreating immediately afterward until they reach Luoyan.”

Duan Ling marked an X in the west, not far from Yubi Pass.

“Luoyan is a large city. We can’t guess if they’ll attack it or not, but as soon as they reach Yubi Pass—presumably in the ninth or tenth month—the Mongols will head back east and return to Ye. Except this time, they’ll be looking for somewhere to hunker down before the snow. They’ll try and capture Ye and winter in the city.”

Duan Ling raised his head and met Li Yanqiu’s eyes. “We must send aid to Ye as soon as possible,” Duan Ling said. “Otherwise, once winter comes, Hejian, Ye, Chang, and all of Hebei will fall under Yuan control. The last envoy said if we will not cede the territory, they will take it by force.”

Li Yanqiu called out the door. “Send Zheng Yan in.”

As soon as Zheng Yan entered, Li Yanqiu gave his orders: “Summon Mu Kuangda, Xie You, Shi Bingchang, Su Fa, and Wu Zun here to discuss with us. Call the crown prince in as well.”

It seemed Li Yanqiu was taking his suggestion seriously. Duan Ling nodded and remained seated at the table. Li Yanqiu lapsed into silence as they waited.

Outside, Wu Du moved as if to close the door. “Leave it open,” Li Yanqiu said. “It’s stuffy in here.”

He leaned back against the divan; a eunuch came with a hot towel and placed it over his eyes. Wu Du glanced at Duan Ling inside the study, his gaze questioning. Duan Ling waved a hand to assure him he was fine. He pointed at his own wrist, then over at Li Yanqiu.

Wu Du got the message at once. He stepped inside and placed his fingers over Li Yanqiu’s pulse.

Again, Li Yanqiu said nothing. Wu Du withdrew his hand a moment later and nodded at Duan Ling—he hadn’t felt anything worrisome.

“We have always been sickly,” Li Yanqiu said, his eyes still covered with the towel. “We are familiar with our own body.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

The imperial study fell silent again, quiet enough to hear their breathing.

“Your Majesty,” Duan Ling said.

“What is it?” Li Yanqiu didn’t move.

Suddenly, Duan Ling was seized by a wild impulse to reveal everything. But once he said it aloud—assuming he was believed at all—he wouldn’t be able to go to Ye; with his identity revealed, the court and country would be thrown into a state of shock, and he would be stuck in the capital while he waited for his claim to be confirmed.

Thus he hesitated.

Li Yanqiu, waiting for him to speak, asked a question of his own: “Why are you so worried about Hebei? After the Treaty of Shangzi, Hebei

belonged to Liao. It was only after several battles were fought that the three southern cities were returned to our rule."

Before Duan Ling could respond, Cai Yan appeared at the door.

"Uncle," he said, bowing toward Li Yanqiu. He smiled at Duan Ling and said, "And you must be Wang Shan."

"Greetings, Your Highness." Duan Ling stood and bowed to him. Cai Yan stepped forward to help him rise, but their hands never touched, just like when they'd sparred all those years ago. Duan Ling returned to his original position at the table.

Cai Yan had expected Li Yanqiu to inform him of what was happening, but instead he only gestured toward Duan Ling and said lightly, "The new tanhua."

He handed him Duan Ling's exam paper, and Cai Yan took it and began to read. Duan Ling observed Cai Yan's expression, wondering what it might reveal. When Cai Yan finished, he didn't speak for a long time. At last, he nodded and sighed, glancing over at Duan Ling with a sad, helpless smile.

Duan Ling returned his smile with the same helplessness. He felt strange, as if two strong emotions warred in him. Initially, he thought Cai Yan was merely feeling regretful about their former friendship—after all, nothing between them would ever be the same. But Cai Yan's sadness appeared real and undisguised.

"My son?" Li Yanqiu asked.

Cai Yan sat in silence, a tear slipping down his cheek.

Duan Ling suddenly realized he must've been remembering his brother, Cai Wen. "Please don't be too sad, Your Highness," he said. "You mustn't upset yourself."

Cai Yan closed his eyes and nodded. A moment later, he opened them again. "Wang Shan, what is the origin of your name?"

With a nod to Li Yanqiu, Duan Ling explained, "The character Shan, with three vertical strokes, is the qian hexagram in the *I-Ching*, while Wang contains the one vertical stroke and three horizontal strokes of kun. It means *qiankun*, or heaven and earth."

Bewildered, Cai Yan said, “Is it not because your father’s surname is Wang?”

Duan Ling replied with a smile, “Your Highness is wise.”

Their words seemed to carry an undercurrent of confrontation.

“Feng Duo told me today that there are several rising talents in this palace examination,” Cai Yan said. “It is heaven’s blessing on our Great Chen, an auspicious sign for our nation’s revival. And I’ve heard Wang Shan is Prime Minister Mu’s disciple as well—I had no idea he had such a promising student all this time.”

“I’ve only been in the Mu household a year,” Duan Ling said.

“Then the one who brought Tong Pass out of danger must have also been you,” Cai Yan said with another small smile.

Li Yanqiu seemed distracted. He was still looking out the open door and didn’t appear to be listening to the young men’s conversation.

“Wu Du helped as well,” Duan Ling replied.

“I thought it was one of Prime Minister Mu’s trusted aides,” Cai Yan said. “It seems you have the considerable skills of the Mu family, and have received the teachings of Prime Minister Mu himself. A rare talent indeed.” He turned his smile toward Li Yanqiu, continuing, “Once you join the court as an official and come upon a difference of opinion with the prime minister, the result will be interesting.”

“You are too kind, Your Highness,” Duan Ling said, feigning humility as he bent forward a little. He heard the veiled jab beneath Cai Yan’s praise: Because Duan Ling was Mu Kuangda’s disciple, he’d already lost the game. Even if Duan Ling regained his identity, he knew too many of the prime minister’s secrets; there was no way Mu Kuangda would let him live.

“Heaven, earth, the emperor, parents, and teachers,” Duan Ling intoned. His polite smile never wavered. “To these we all must bow. I will accord my teacher the respect he deserves, but I will not be silent when it comes to the interests of the nation. And if I really can’t win against him, I’ll just bring out General Xie.”

Cai Yan and Duan Ling both laughed. Cai Yan, too, discerned Duan Ling’s true meaning. Even if Mu Kuangda truly wanted to eliminate him,

the prime minister was still a civil official. So long as Xie You stood on Duan Ling's side, Mu Kuangda couldn't touch him.

"General Xie keeps his own counsel," Cai Yan volleyed back. "I'm afraid it may be difficult to persuade him."

Cai Yan clearly thought Xie You wouldn't recognize Duan Ling so easily. Yet on the contrary, Duan Ling believed Xie You would be one of the first to acknowledge him. Their last meeting, as surprising as it was, had given him a strange, powerful feeling.

Their verbal sparring was interrupted by the arrival of the general himself. Xie You glanced at Duan Ling and nodded.

"You arrived quickly," Li Yanqiu observed.

"I was on night patrol in the palace," Xie You said. "I rushed over as soon as I received Your Majesty's summons."

Cai Yan gestured toward Duan Ling. "Our new tanhua."

Xie You nodded again, and Duan Ling hurriedly bowed in response. Li Yanqiu hadn't announced the rankings yet, so Cai Yan oughtn't have mentioned it—but since he was the crown prince, perhaps he could do as he pleased. Su Fa and the others arrived shortly, coming in one by one. Mu Kuangda was last to step into the study.

Chapter 124

ONCE EVERYONE was seated, Li Yanqiu spoke up. “No suitable candidate emerged during our long discussion yesterday, but as of today, Wang Shan has volunteered to go to Ye on our behalf. Does anyone have any objections?”

Differing expressions crossed the gathered advisors’ faces. Mu Kuangda frowned slightly, while Xie You seemed surprised.

“You’ve never fought a battle before,” Xie You said. “Don’t go throwing your life away.”

Mu Kuangda smiled. “This disciple of mine defeated an army of fifty thousand at Tong Pass, and you say he’s never fought a battle?”

Xie You had no ready response to that.

“Wu Du and Mister Fei Hongde were there as well,” Duan Ling said, quickly deflecting. “It wasn’t only me.”

“Mister Fei was at Tong Pass?” Xie You asked, frowning.

Duan Ling nodded. Everyone traded glances.

Su Fa, the Minister of Revenue, sneered. “The man has a silver tongue.”

During the battle at Tong Pass, Duan Ling had successfully gathered evidence of Bian Lingbai’s burgeoning rebellion and beaten back Western Liang’s army, thereby allowing the imperial court to firmly control the garrison at Tong Pass, one of the two major border passes. This military might was now in Mu Kuangda’s hands.

Xie You had, naturally, been dissatisfied by these results. Though Bian Lingbai, Han Bin, and the other border generals were distinct from the Black-Plated Army—one defended against foreign foes while the other maintained peace within—the fact that these civil officials had replaced Bian Lingbai on their own was a slap to the military’s face. The border governor had died too suddenly; anyone with a brain could see the hand at

work here. It was all but certain that, in a case like this, Wu Du had put his poison to use.

“What’s your plan?” Li Yanqiu asked Duan Ling.

“Ye isn’t like Tong Pass,” Duan Ling said, rising to his feet. He showed everyone the map he’d drawn. “It’s not located near a major border crossing. It’d be too expensive to maintain a large military presence there—and it’s too dangerous to ask General Han Bin to mobilize the garrison at Yubi Pass. First, distant water cannot quench a fire close at hand; a slow remedy will not resolve our immediate emergency. Second, sooner or later, borrowed soldiers must always be returned. Yuan’s raids along the Great Wall could carry on for a long time, and we’re unable to predict when they will come and go.”

Duan Ling paused. “To the north are Xunyang and Shangzi; to the east, Yubi Pass—all four hundred li away. These are all on the front line of conflict with the Mongols. It’s too much to defend. We cannot increase the number of our troops here, and even if we could, it wouldn’t solve all our problems. It’s my opinion that, this time, we should not increase the troops by a single soldier.”

The officials relaxed. No troops meant no money needed to be spent, solving one problem.

“If necessary, the court is willing to spend what we must on the defense of Ye,” Mu Kuangda said. “We can afford to lose neither Ye nor Hejian.”

“This plan won’t cost much,” Duan Ling said. “Between the three cities in Hebei, Ye is farthest north and bore the brunt of the Mongols’ attack. Chang and Hejian are located to the south, one on each side; as long as the garrisons in these places are appropriately reorganized, they can be developed into a rear reserve. Given that it’s difficult for the military to act effectively here, we instead must train civilian militias, study better methods of fighting against the Mongols, recruit and train more soldiers, cultivate the land to feed them, and ultimately try to rebuild the beacon towers along the borders. If we do this, then when the Yuan army attacks again, these three cities can support one another and resist for quite a while—using guerilla tactics to counter guerilla tactics.”

“Hejian and Chang suffered through the Battle of Shangzi. Their populations are still small,” Mu Kuangda said, shaking his head. “They can’t field a militia.”

“This is a long-term strategy,” Duan Ling said. “It will take at least ten years to redevelop the region. Even after the Battle of Shangzi, nearly a hundred thousand households remain between the three cities and the nearby rural areas. Additionally, His Majesty reduced taxes in the north this year. If these cities are allowed to recuperate over time, they can raise their own defensive garrison.”

“If that’s the long-term strategy,” Xie You chimed in, “how do you propose to solve the current problem?”

“My first move will be to sign an agreement with the Liao Empire once I arrive,” Duan Ling answered. “If Ye falls to Yuan, Liao will also have a hard time—without the buffer of our cities, they’ll have to fight the Mongols themselves. To guard against future trouble, the Liao Empire will almost certainly be willing to help us contain the Yuan army. If they can stall Yuan for even one winter, we can begin training the militias after the autumn harvest this year—and after the spring of next year, we will have a real chance of defeating Yuan invaders.”

Su Fa shook his head. “There are simply not enough people. Hebei can no longer afford to pay the court’s taxes, which is why they were cut to begin with. The records report a hundred thousand households, but only twenty to thirty thousand of them paid any tax. They scarcely have enough to fill their stomachs, and you want them to serve in a militia?”

“There are enough people,” Duan Ling said. “Every year, when winter comes, a large number of refugees migrate south with their families because of either natural disasters or the Mongols’ raids. Having all these people flowing into the Central Plains is dangerous—so why not resettle them in Hebei? No one has dared to travel between these three cities because of the Mongols’ constant plundering, so there are large swaths of unfarmed land there. Nearly a hundred thousand people flee south to the Central Plains every year. These people can become your new labor force.”

“And what will they eat this winter?” Su Fa pressed him. “If we assume what you say is true, a hundred thousand people will pour into

Hebei. One misstep, and even if the Yuan army doesn't attack again, you'll die at the hands of thousands of starving refugees."

"I have a plan in mind," Duan Ling said mysteriously. "In any case, there will be no riots. I know the Central Plains has no food to spare, so there's no need for the court to support the cities with any either."

The room fell silent, and everyone looked toward Li Yanqiu. It was clear they'd discussed these very issues while trying to solve the problem of Ye, and equally clear that they'd never come upon such a clear path as the one Duan Ling was offering now.

Xie You was first to respond. "You're too young. You don't know the dangers of the battlefield."

"The late emperor was leading troops by the age of fourteen," Duan Ling said. "At sixteen, he became famous after his battle against the Xiongnu king at the foot of Jiangjun Ridge. What age do you find appropriate, General Xie?"

Li Yanqiu broke into a laugh—and suddenly, Xie You laughed too.

"What do you think, my son?" Li Yanqiu asked Cai Yan.

"The tanhua seems to have thought of everything," Cai Yan replied. "I think his plan is feasible."

Duan Ling had said all he needed to say, but he still had one thing left to resolve—the issue of food through the winter. This, he had kept to himself; he couldn't risk Cai Yan going mad and trying to thwart him with no regard for the nation.

Quietly, he waited for the gathered officials to make their decision. Nobody spoke for a long time as they mulled over the potential problems.

"How many people do you need?" Li Yanqiu asked.

At those words, Duan Ling knew his decision was made.

He'd originally wished to ask for a troop from the Black-Plated Army. But the more he thought about it, the less advisable it seemed: It would be difficult to gain the loyalty of Ye's generals if he brought along an army from the capital to breathe down their necks. Such a move would inevitably create an invisible tension between factions.

He, too, made up his mind. “Not a single soldier.”

“The Black-Plated Army can send men to assist you,” Xie You offered—giving his tacit assent to Duan Ling’s plan.

“No need,” Duan Ling said. “Though your kindness is appreciated, General.”

“You’re young, but you’re bold,” Xie You said, smiling.

“However, we do need two members from the Ministry of Works for accounting and construction,” Duan Ling said to Li Yanqiu. “And one member from the Ministry of Revenue to help settle the refugees.”

“Who will lead your soldiers?” Li Yanqiu asked.

“Wu Du.”

Chatter erupted immediately.

“Not Wu Du.” Xie You said.

“Why not?” Duan Ling retorted. “Wu Du served Zhao Kui for many years, and the late emperor after that. He has experience on the battlefield, and he would have no issues managing an army or leading them into battle.”

“Aside from him, you also need a governor’s assistant to manage personnel and accounting,” Mu Kuangda added, “one criminal judge, responsible for sentencing any wrongdoers, and a chief clerk, responsible for the city’s money and grain. You cannot use Ye’s current officials—these duties must be reassigned.”

“Agreed,” Duan Ling said. “I’ll select them myself and make arrangements when I arrive.”

“I have no objection, then,” Mu Kuangda said, now smiling as well. He looked at the other officials. “What do you all think?”

Though in name Mu Kuangda was Duan Ling’s teacher, they were colleagues in the court. Duan Ling had been nervous when he began speaking; after all, he hadn’t discussed his plans with Mu Kuangda at all, and he was afraid the prime minister would oppose him. Seeing that his teacher didn’t object, he felt much more comfortable.

He studied Cai Yan. He still felt like Cai Yan had other plans in play—but no matter what they might be, Duan Ling was already committed to his course.

“When will you leave?” Li Yanqiu asked.

“I’ll depart after gathering the people I need—this matter cannot be delayed. Even if we leave immediately, it will take a month to get to Ye,” Duan Ling replied.

To the assembled officials, Li Yanqiu said, “Are there any further objections?”

No one spoke.

“It is settled then,” he announced. “Tomorrow morning, Prime Minister Mu will issue a letter of appointment to Wu Du and our new tanhua. Due to the urgency of the situation, they are both to be promoted two ranks; their authority shall be equal to a county governor. Anything they request should be provided as swiftly as possible.”

Relief finally settled over Duan Ling, and he nodded.

“You are dismissed,” Li Yanqiu said. “Mu Kuangda, Su Fa, and Xie You, please stay.”

Duan Ling exited the room with the rest. Lang Junxia had arrived at some point and now stood with Cai Yan at the end of the corridor. Duan Ling still had much to think about; he didn’t want to fight with Cai Yan right then. He already had enough on his mind.

But Cai Yan didn’t move, as if he was waiting for Duan Ling. Briefly, Duan Ling thought it was a pity he couldn’t slap Cai Yan like he had Lang Junxia.

“Come on,” Wu Du said.

“Don’t poison him,” Duan Ling warned. He was about to leave Jiang Prefecture. If Cai Yan died all of a sudden, it would throw everything into chaos.

Wu Du laughed and followed Duan Ling to the end of the corridor.

Duan Ling squared his shoulders and stepped up to Cai Yan. Neither spoke. As the two stood facing each other with Lang Junxia and Wu Du at

their shoulders, tension seemed to crackle between them.

“I didn’t expect to see you here,” Cai Yan said.

It was the first unguarded conversation they’d had since they’d parted in the Xianbei Mountains. At that precise moment, both were bound by their own constraints: Duan Ling didn’t dare raise Mu Kuangda’s suspicions, while Cai Yan was equally cautious of Li Yanqiu. Both understood that, once freed of these shackles, theirs would be a fight to the death.

“I want to make a deal with you,” Cai Yan said.

“What is it?”

Cai Yan glanced at Wu Du. The assassin didn’t appear surprised; it seemed he already knew Duan Ling’s true identity. Cai Yan continued, “The country is in dire straits. I won’t lay a hand on you, and don’t you do anything rash. We’ll speak again when you come back from Ye.”

“Agreed,” Duan Ling said. “Is there anything else?”

Cai Yan hesitated, but Duan Ling could guess what he was thinking. “You want to ask why I’m not staying in Jiang Prefecture to expose you, and why I didn’t send Wu Du into the Eastern Palace, don’t you?”

Until their fateful meeting at Qunfang Pavilion, Cai Yan hadn’t known Duan Ling was right under his nose, living under the name Wang Shan. Had Duan Ling sent Wu Du into the Eastern Palace to poison Cai Yan, he’d have been rid of this imposter in a single stroke. But if Duan Ling had chosen that path, he wouldn’t have been able to guarantee his own return to court—the result was too unpredictable, and the risk too great.

Chapter 125

"YOU MISSED your best chance," Cai Yan said. "But it's not wise to go to Ye now. I feel I ought to caution you: Surely you're not stupid enough to believe Borjigin Batu will grant you any favors just because of your childhood friendship?"

"Of course not."

"Good. I'd prefer you didn't live, but if you must, I don't want you to fall into the Borjigin family's hands and be used against the imperial court."

Cai Yan's worries were justified. Batu both knew Duan Ling's real identity as well as that an imposter had taken his place. If Batu wanted to stir up trouble, he had the ability to create an incredibly unmanageable situation for Southern Chen's court. Since the Yuan envoys had departed, however, there had been no additional movement from the Mongols. Perhaps Batu was concerned for Duan Ling's safety as well—or he simply wanted to keep the matter to himself and prepare for a sharp, clean attack.

"Do you know why I insisted on going to Ye myself?" Duan Ling asked.

"I'm telling you, Batu won't help you," Cai Yan said with a lift of his brows. "You'll only bring even more trouble down on us."

"No," Duan Ling replied. "It's not because of him. It's because Hebei was my father's fief. That's also why Fourth Uncle supported my decision."

Surprise struck Cai Yan. Li Jianhong's title when he lived was the Prince of Beiliang. Beiliang was an old name for Hebei—a long-standing title preserved from the preceding dynasty.

Duan Ling smiled at him. "Goodbye."

Cai Yan felt like he'd been slapped across the face.

Duan Ling took a polite step back, as if he'd returned to the Ming Academy of their past. He raised his hands to his forehead, clasped them, and bowed to Cai Yan.

Then he swept past him and out of the corridor.

Outside the palace, the sky had darkened. Duan Ling belatedly remembered his promise to meet up with Huang Jian and the others.

“I know someone you can use,” Wu Du said. “I’ll write a letter tonight and send a courier. He was Zhao Kui’s subordinate, a man named Yan Di. He was in charge of the army’s public works; he’s an excellent commander of troops, and he knows army logistics. His expertise is just what you need.”

“Let’s go and see him together,” Duan Ling said. “If he’s as good as you say, we can’t risk offending him.”

Yan Di had been investigated following Zhao Kui’s death, but he’d never been Zhao Kui’s close confidant, and so nothing of interest was found—much less evidence of an actual crime. Even so, he had taken part in Zhao Kui’s failed rebellion, and Li Jianhong had therefore ordered the man dismissed from his post. So it was for all the men who had followed Zhao Kui: Though they had been spared execution, the court refused to assign them to any important positions, and they weren’t allowed to leave their homes. Yan Di had been forced to take up carpentry work to earn a living.

Duan Ling wasted no time; he prepared a purse of money and struck out to visit him with Wu Du straight from the palace.

After moving from Xichuan to Jiang Prefecture with the rest of the capital, Yan Di was clearly having a difficult time in the unfamiliar city. They could see at a glance that he was living in poverty, yet still trying to support his four children. When Wu Du offered him the opportunity to travel to Ye—and draw a military salary once again—Yan Di agreed at once.

Their next stop was the imperial prison, where Wu Du had another man in mind: a bachelor named Shi Qi, who had managed Zhao Kui’s account books. Duan Ling asked after him, and the guards brought the man out. Duan Ling was surprised to see that he was only about twenty. His release from the prison would take some time to arrange, so Duan Ling made a note to inform Mu Kuangda about him. Hopefully, within a fortnight or so, the prime minister could have Shi Qi rushed to Ye, where he could redeem himself through excellent service.

While they’d been running hither and thither, the hour had grown late. Duan Ling stopped and stretched his arms overhead.

“Are you still going to meet up with your fellow scholars?” Wu Du asked.

Right—Huang Jian and the others would be expecting him. Duan Ling sagged in resignation. He’d been so busy since this morning he’d scarcely had time to take a breath.

“I’ll meet them tomorrow,” Duan Ling said. “I want to go home.”

“We’ll be leaving tomorrow. There’ll be plenty of time to rest once we’re on the road.”

Wu Du was right. Duan Ling sighed and tidied himself up to head over to World’s Best Noodle Shop with Wu Du.

Though it was already late, the restaurant was bustling; it wouldn’t close for another two hours. Huang Jian, Qin Xuguang, and Zeng Yongnuo were drinking and picking at some small dishes in the hall when Duan Ling arrived.

“It was only a casual invitation,” Qin Xuguang said to him with a smile. “I can see Wang-xiong is a man of his word.”

“This is the least I could do,” Duan Ling said, returning his smile. “My apologies for keeping everyone waiting.”

What a close call, he thought. *If Wu Du hadn’t reminded me, I might really have gone back home to sleep*. If he made a habit of breaking his promises, it would be difficult to make friends. He made a mental note to have better self-discipline in the future.

Zeng Yongnuo glanced at Wu Du. “And this is…”

He surely recognized Wu Du as one of the exam’s proctors and was waiting for Duan Ling to introduce him.

“This is my sworn brother, Wu Du.”

With a nod, Wu Du excused himself to speak with the shop owner. The guest in the private room on the second floor had just left, and normally, it would’ve been tidied up and closed. But the owner was a friend of Zheng Yan’s, and at a word from Wu Du, he agreed to move their party to the second floor.

“You go sit up there,” Wu Du said. “I’ll stay down here for a bit.”

The three scholars nodded gratefully at Wu Du and followed Duan Ling up to the second floor. Almost the second they sat down, four bowls of noodles appeared in front of them. Duan Ling was famished; murmuring a quick apology, he dug in without waiting. The others had been drinking for a while and were also ready to fill their stomachs with something more substantial.

"I never imagined Wu Du would be your sworn brother," Zeng Yongnuo said. "Back at home, I of course heard stories about Zheng Yan of Huaiyin, and three other assassins of Great Chen too."

"Yes," Duan Ling said, a smile crossing his lips. "Our meeting was pure fate—it must have been written in the stars. He was the one who took me in and introduced me to Prime Minister Mu; he's like both a father and a brother to me."

Even Huang Jian hadn't known about Duan Ling's background, and he nodded along with the others at this new piece of information.

"Tonight's dinner is a little rushed," Qin Xuguang said. "We should've prepared a banquet and hosted you properly. But it's late now, and we've already eaten, so let's leave it at this tonight and go somewhere else tomorrow to drink to our hearts' content."

After a slight hesitation, Duan Ling said, "I'm leaving Jiang Prefecture tomorrow."

"What?!" the others chorused.

Now's the time to lay it all out. According to Duan Ling's predictions, among the three, Huang Jian would definitely score well enough to become an official. Even without knowing how talented he really was, Li Yanqiu was certain to show the orphan of an Imperial Salt Censor fair consideration. What's more, anyone who could earn Mu Kuangda's approval must be truly talented. And if Huang Jian counted Qin Xuguang and Zeng Yongnuo as friends, the gap between them couldn't be large. Which was to say: These three were all quite talented.

"I'm going to Ye."

The three of them exclaimed in surprise, and Duan Ling explained what had happened. Huang Jian had always assumed this shidi of his must be more than met the eye, but he hadn't thought he'd go out and get himself

assigned official tasks the very day of the palace examination. He now recalled the Tong Pass incident he'd heard about from Mu Kuangda.

"While we were waiting for you tonight," he said, "I wondered if you were discussing solutions to the Ye crisis with our teacher. I didn't expect him to send you there in person."

"No one else can go," Duan Ling said.

"Hebei has been in decline since the fall of Shangzi," Qin Xuguang said. "The court has neglected the region for years. Thinking on it, perhaps this was heaven's will. But have you already decided on a plan?"

Duan Ling had only a rough idea of what he wished to do and the order in which to do it. This was a great opportunity for the three of them to help him brainstorm; they started discussing how best to use Duan Ling's limited resources right away. The three cities these Mongol raids had thrown into chaos had already endured years of war. If they weren't careful, the situation might unravel completely. Any move carried considerable risk.

"You mustn't treat the local officials harshly when you arrive," Huang Jian said. "New officials tend to flex their power, but you should tread carefully."

"You're right, Shixiong," Duan Ling said, nodding.

"I heard my father say there's money to be made in Ye," Zeng Yongnuo added. "It was once a key hub of trade between Chen and Liao—but after the war, merchants stopped traveling east and took their trade to Hejian. The region was simply too dangerous; if it wasn't the Mongols, it was the bandits. Trade gradually declined until it became what we see now."

Duan Ling darted downstairs and grabbed paper and brush, then returned to jot the information down. "What else?"

Qin Xuguang thought a moment. "How do you plan on feeding the refugees through the winter? Don't worry; we all know how to keep our mouths shut. If a problem crops up, write to us here and we'll do what we can to think of a solution."

Duan Ling judged his fellow scholars trustworthy men. Though he couldn't be sure whether factional divisions might arise in the future, at

least for now, they were all working toward the same goal; it would do them no good to betray him.

“I plan to borrow grain from Liao,” Duan Ling admitted. “I became acquainted with Mister Fei Hongde at Tong Pass. If I’m not mistaken, he’s at the side of the Liao emperor as we speak. If Ye falls, the Liao Empire will be next to face the incursions of the Mongols—there’s no way they’re not aware of this themselves. I’ll write a letter to ask Mister Fei Hongde for help, and hope he will appeal to the Liao court.”

“It’s a reasonable idea,” Huang Jian said.

Qin Xuguang nodded slowly. “Perhaps we can also reach the Marquis of Huaiyin.”

“That’s a good idea too,” Huang Jian said. “After all, if northern refugees really do pour into the Central Plains in the winter, Ye won’t be able to feed them all alone. Huaiyin is only two hundred li to the south. The Yao family will end up having to support them, even if they don’t want to.”

Duan Ling privately thought that asking foreigners was more reliable than asking his own people. Who knew what conditions Yao Fu would impose for his help?

“The Liao Empire is currently split between the Northern and Southern Courts,” Huang Jian continued. “I’m sure you know that after Yelü Dashi’s death, the influence of the Han family of the Southern Court has only grown. Who will you ask for grain?”

Duan Ling had given a deal of thought to this question too—and so he answered confidently, “Yelü Zongzhen.”

The three scholars quickly put their heads together, strategizing on how the Liao emperor might be induced to provide them food for the winter.

Back in the Eastern Palace, Cai Yan’s brow was tightly furrowed. Feng Duo stood before him. “Your Highness, the timing is right. He’s the one choosing to run into danger. Our plan should go even smoother than we thought.”

“What’s the current situation in Ye?” Cai Yan asked.

“The people there are tough,” Feng Duo said. “Bandits are rampant in the area; they rob and kill indiscriminately. Yet he’s refusing the offer of soldiers and relying instead entirely on Wu Du? He’s too bold.”

Cai Yan mulled this over in silence.

“When he arrives, he’ll have his hands full with everything that needs doing. Wu Du will certainly also be too busy to stay at his side at all times. If he truly intends to fortify Ye against Yuan’s attacks, he’ll need Wu Du to train soldiers and dispense with any obstacles. We only need to wait for an opportunity when Wu Du is absent, and we can blame his death on the local bandits. Our hands will appear clean.”

“If he dies, will Ye be taken by the Mongols?”

“Don’t worry, Your Highness,” Feng Duo replied. “Even if he dies in the north, nothing will change between the three cities; the court will simply send someone else.”

Cai Yan considered for another few moments. “Let him deal with the problems in Ye first. I want to see what he can do.”

Feng Duo nodded his understanding. “Then we’ll wait for winter before sending in the shadow squad. If he can do what he says, he should be almost finished with his work by then.”

Cai Yan sat there dazed, stuck between the two plans. “No—we still have to act as soon as possible.”

Feng Duo paused tactfully. “Then we’ll send out the shadow squad at once.”

“Wait.” Cai Yan sighed, frowning. Helplessly, he said, “Is there really no one else in the imperial court fit for the task right now?”

Chapter 126

FENG DUO DIDN'T RESPOND, quietly waiting for Cai Yan's decision.

"Send the shadow squad right away," Cai Yan said. "It seems we won't be needing Wuluohou Mu."

"We won't," Feng Duo agreed. "The situation in Ye is dangerous enough. Refugees have banded together and occupied the mountains, declaring themselves kings. Wu Du will have his work cut out for him; we only need to bribe a few city guards to report their movements to us and we'll have no trouble catching Wang Shan alone. Ultimately, getting rid of Wang Shan is a simple matter. Even if we're thwarted within the city, we can just sell his information to the Mongols and let them deal with him instead."

"No," Cai Yan said, firm. "We cannot let him fall into the hands of the Mongols."

"Yes, sir."

"Go on, then." Killing Duan Ling was a foregone conclusion—but at the last moment, Cai Yan thought of something else. "Kill Wu Du too. They both must die."

Feng Duo nodded and bowed himself out.

For some reason, from the moment Cai Yan had seen Duan Ling again, a fear he'd previously forgotten came rushing back. He needed to get rid of Duan Ling as quickly as possible. If Cai Yan let him grow too powerful, no force on earth could stop him.

It was long past sunset, and the World's Best Noodle Shop was preparing to close up for the night. Duan Ling put a hand to his forehead, dizzy. Thank goodness he'd decided to meet Huang Jian and the others, or he'd have missed too many important details and ended up in trouble.

"What about personnel promotions?" Duan Ling asked.

“Leave that to your assistants,” Huang Jian said. “Any responsibility that can be delegated, delegate it. Otherwise, you’ll never be able to get to everything, even if you grow three heads and six arms.”

“Okay.” Duan Ling was beginning to understand that assessing people’s talents and appointing them well was a profound skill. If he tried to do things the same off-the-cuff way he had in Tong Pass, he might work himself to death before he solved anything.

“You must treat your subordinates well and ensure they’re loyal to you,” Qin Xuguang added. “One who’s too exacting will have no followers. As for petty instances of corruption and bribery, they can be ignored as long as it does not undermine the endeavor.”

Qin Xuguang spoke almost too frankly. Duan Ling and these men would be colleagues in the future; if Duan Ling remembered what Qin Xuguang had just said and reported it, Qin Xuguang would be the one in trouble. But because Duan Ling had trusted them with his plans regarding the Liao Empire, Qin Xuguang was trusting him in turn. Duan Ling couldn’t help but swell a bit with happiness.

“The shop’s closing,” Duan Ling said. “Let’s go. Whether you’re being sent out to an official post or entering the Hanlin Academy, let’s meet again.”

“You’ll definitely return within a year,” Huang Jian said. “As long as everything goes smoothly, there’s no reason to let such a talent remain in Ye forever.”

Everyone laughed. They said their goodbyes, agreeing to write each other when they could. Duan Ling still felt there were several puzzles with which he might need their help. Him being sent off as an official to Ye was a good thing for Huang Jian and the others, since they would be in the court. If he acquitted himself well in Ye, they could assist each other in their respective positions—as long as they didn’t turn on one another later.

Duan Ling descended the stairs to find Wu Du and Zheng Yan sitting across from each other, drinking.

“You’re here too?” Duan Ling asked.

“I’m busy tomorrow, so I came to see you off now,” Zheng Yan said.

Huang Jian and the others bade them farewell, leaving Duan Ling with Wu Du and Zheng Yan. The three set out, Wu Du leading Skychaser and Zheng Yan leading his own horse as they strolled along.

“I hear they’ll appoint a new commandant to send to Hejian tomorrow,” Zheng Yan commented, patting the horse.

Wu Du nodded but said nothing.

Zheng Yan glanced over at Duan Ling. “You offered yourself up to go to such a remote place. I was surprised.”

He paused in his steps, and Duan Ling slowed as well. Duan Ling felt that Zheng Yan had, somehow, guessed at the truth. He was confident Wu Du wouldn’t have let anything slip; this was Duan Ling’s secret to tell.

“You don’t like the crown prince?” Zheng Yan asked.

“Lord Zheng,” Duan Ling said with a smile. “Even if that were true, would I say so? Don’t set me up.”

Zheng Yan smiled too; regardless of what he said, Duan Ling had made his attitude clear. He narrowed his eyes. “I have a letter here,” he said. “If you run into any problems in Ye, send it to Marquis Yao in Huaiyin. He’ll come to assist you on my behalf.”

Duan Ling accepted the letter. “Thank you.”

“I’m offering it to you on the emperor’s orders,” Zheng Yan said. “The north is dangerous. Be careful.”

He mounted his horse and rode off into the dark.

“Why did he ask about that Cai dog?” Duan Ling asked when he was out of sight.

“He heard what the envoy said that night too,” Wu Du said. “He’s started to suspect the crown prince—or rather, maybe he’s doubted him since the beginning.”

It was very late now. The air of the fifth month was clear and fresh; moonlight washed the ground of the small alley they passed through.

“We need to go see Prime Minister Mu once we’re back,” Wu Du said.

Thinking about it gave Duan Ling a headache. They were experiencing such a rare moment of peace; he hoped the alley would never end. He strolled along at a leisurely pace, holding Wu Du's hand, feeling as if they were the only two people in the world.

"Did you mean what you said in the imperial study today?" Wu Du asked.

"What did I say?" Duan Ling was silent a moment, trying to remember. He suddenly recalled Xie You's doubts about Wu Du's ability. "Oh—I did."

He turned and looked at Wu Du, dressed in his black martial arts robes and leading Skychaser. "If you wore a helmet and armor, I think you would make a very handsome general," Duan Ling said with a smile.

Wu Du dipped his head and caught Duan Ling in a kiss. When they parted, Wu Du gazed into his eyes. His serious expression was tinged with worry, brow slightly creased. "This time, when you go, you'll have to kill people—those who oppose you, or want to harm you. You'll need to kill a lot. To successfully lead an army, you must execute those who break the law. In the city, you may need to order the deaths of the wealthy and corrupt, and distribute their money among the people."

"I know," Duan Ling said with a touch of melancholy.

"There might be enough blood to fill a river," Wu Du said. "You're naturally kind. I'm worried you'll hesitate."

"I won't." Duan Ling sighed. "I've already seen too much death."

"I'll be your blade, so don't be afraid of that. But promise me—you can't be softhearted toward those who need to die, or the consequences will be endless."

"Okay. I promise," Duan Ling said with a nod.

As Wu Du nodded solemnly back, Duan Ling felt like he'd glimpsed a different side of him—he was reminded once again that Wu Du could and would take lives, though not without cause.

Perhaps Wu Du would be required to carry out a massacre this time. The thought made Duan Ling uneasy. But such a day was bound to come; in an unfamiliar place, consolidating power quickly meant ruling with an iron

fist. He mulled the problem over until they reached the end of the alley and arrived home.

A housekeeper waited for them outside the Mu residence. “Wang-shaoye, the master is waiting for you in the study. Please make your way there as soon as possible.”

“How long has he been waiting?” Duan Ling asked.

“Almost two hours.”

It was nearly midnight when Duan Ling and Wu Du rushed to their last meeting of the day.

The first words out of Duan Ling’s mouth upon entering were an apology for making Mu Kuangda wait. Mu Kuangda waved him off. Two strangers sat beside the table in the study, where a pair of letters lay. Though the hour was late, it seemed everyone was still wide awake, discussing the problem of Ye.

“Did you go meet your shixiong?” Mu Kuangda asked.

“I did.” Duan Ling couldn’t hide anything from Mu Kuangda.

“You still have much to learn from Huang Jian,” Mu Kuangda said. He gestured at one of the men at his side: “This is Mister Lin.”

Lin Yunqi greeted Duan Ling from behind the table.

“Mister Lin used to work under Ren Bisheng, the Salt and Iron Envoy of Xichuan,” Mu Kuangda said. “He handles assessments and reviews of subordinates. I believe he may be of some use to you.”

As Duan Ling hurriedly thanked Lin Yunqi, Mu Kuangda introduced the other man—this one a soldier. He bowed to Duan Ling.

“This is Wang Zheng—he shares your surname,” Mu Kuangda said. “He served the late emperor as an assistant prefect, but after the Northern Expedition Army was disbanded, he remained in Xichuan. When the capital moved, he came to Jiang Prefectural City with the rest of us. Xie You recommended him to me personally, so I am confident he is a just and upright man.”

One man was in charge of promotions, and the other punishments. Duan Ling had understood that he would have Mu Kuangda’s people

around him when he went—Mu Kuangda needed to retain final say on whom to reward and whom to punish or he could not be at ease. He held a reasonable fear that Duan Ling would amass his own power in Ye and, should he succeed in his mission, throw off Mu Kuangda's yoke completely.

Duan Ling exchanged a few words with the men until Mu Kuangda said, "It's late. You gentlemen should go back and rest. There will be plenty of time to speak with the new governor in the future."

Lin Yunqi and Wang Zheng stood and said their farewells. As soon as they stepped outside, Mu Kuangda said, "Let's speak with the doors closed."

Duan Ling laughed and stood to shut the door. Only he, Wu Du, and Mu Kuangda remained in the room.

Into the silence, Mu Kuangda said, "You first, Disciple."

Duan Ling's stomach twisted nervously. He knew Mu Kuangda probably had a fair few opinions about the actions he'd taken today.

"I want to borrow grain from the Liao Empire," Duan Ling began, then explained his plan to Mu Kuangda.

"Fei Hongde is with Yelü Zongzhen, yes," Mu Kuangda replied when he'd finished. "I believe you're right; it is possible."

Duan Ling nodded and moved on to roughly explain what he'd learned from Huang Jian, adding some thoughts of his own.

"Good—they are sound ideas. Is there anything else you want to say to me?"

Duan Ling knew Mu Kuangda wanted him to explain why he insisted on going to Ye personally. "No."

"You are the new tanhua." Then, as expected—"Why do you wish to go to Ye? And why did you not speak to me first?"

Mu Kuangda spoke with clarity and ease, but Duan Ling knew that if he offered an insufficient answer, he would become suspicious. In reality, Mu Kuangda had already begun to suspect he was holding something back; after all, he had acted spontaneously, without discussing such a huge decision with Mu Kuangda at all.

“I told Wang Shan to do it,” Wu Du interjected.

“No, it was my decision.” Duan Ling made a small silencing gesture at Wu Du; he didn’t want him to take the blame. “I…I just wanted to spend more time with Wu Du.”

Out of all the possible answers Mu Kuangda had imagined to his question, he had never expected such a simple admission.

Chapter 127

MU KUANGDA WAS STRUCK speechless. He stared at Duan Ling, his brow furrowing. “Why are you so willful?’”

Uneasy again, Duan Ling held his silence.

“One day, you’ll be brought to ruin if you let yourself be swayed by your heart.”

Duan Ling stayed silent, as did Wu Du.

Mu Kuangda suddenly found the whole situation ridiculous. What was this? His most promising student had fallen in love with a man and was tossing his future away, yet it felt like *he* was the one at fault for breaking up the young couple. The reason he’d just been given was absurd, but considering Duan Ling’s reaction, Mu Kuangda had no choice but to believe it.

“Are you coming back, Tanhua?” Mu Kuangda asked, incredulous. “Or are you two planning to elope?”

“We’re coming back,” Duan Ling hurriedly assured him.

“Wang Shan!” Mu Kuangda, finally moved to anger, hurled one of the letters on the table at Duan Ling. “What on *earth* are you thinking?!”

Duan Ling dropped to one knee, not daring to argue in his own defense. Wu Du seemed as if he was about to say something, but Duan Ling turned and shook his head slightly.

“Wu Du. Get out,” Mu Kuangda said, his voice cold.

Wu Du tactfully stepped outside. Duan Ling, still kneeling, folded the letter neatly and placed it back on the table.

Mu Kuangda took a sip of tea. “Wang Shan, listen carefully to what I’m about to say.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ve grown bold enough to think you can oppose me now, is that it? I intended to send Wu Du into the Eastern Palace, so you’re pulling this

trick to run away with him?”

“That wasn’t my intention,” Duan Ling said. “It’s just that…any time together is precious. This is my heart’s wish, the only thing I ask for.”

Mu Kuangda gazed at Duan Ling, uncomprehending.

“Teacher,” Duan Ling said in a trembling voice. “Please grant me this. In the future, if you ask me to wade through fire or water, climb a mountain of swords or descend into a sea of flames, I—I’ll do anything.”

Mu Kuangda didn’t know whether he should laugh or cry as he listened to Duan Ling plead with him. “In life, there are many things that cannot be achieved,” he said with solemnity. “‘The moon waxes and wanes; everyone experiences joys and sorrows, separations and reunions.’[2] Do you understand?”

Duan Ling knelt before the table, unmoving.

“What kind of distraction is this?” Mu Kuangda asked, lowering his voice. “What’s so tempting about Wu Du? His skills in bed? Lust clouds the mind, you know. Even setting the matter of going to Ye aside, you were willing to defy me for a reason like this? Or did Wu Du coerce you?”

“He didn’t. It was my own idea.” Duan Ling paused to gather himself. “In the eyes of the court, if I ask for leave to do this, everyone will think it was your idea. And if I can save Ye…it will benefit the country as well. There is no downside.”

“Forget it.” Mu Kuangda sighed, exhausted in both body and mind. Despite their long discussion, his disciple still genuinely wanted to elope with an assassin. “When I was younger, I too had someone I wished to marry. Within a few years, you’ll forget all about these dreams of staying together forever; even by next year, you’ll find your actions today ridiculous.”

Duan Ling’s heart thumped, but he knew he’d succeeded. Mu Kuangda had accepted his outrageous yet entirely plausible explanation.

“When you arrive in Ye, be careful,” Mu Kuangda said. “Sending a letter and receiving a reply will take a whole month. At that distance, I won’t be able to help you.”

Duan Ling let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you, sir.”

“I’ll try to bring you back as soon as possible. Take some pity on your old teacher. There’s no one useful in court except now Huang Jian. If you go, it’ll be at least a year before you return. All that work put into your education and you choose to go off to the hinterlands. A waste of talent.”

Ducking his head, Duan Ling said nothing.

“Go on, then,” Mu Kuangda said. “Don’t say too much to Wu Du.”

Mu Kuangda was harder to deal with than everyone else Duan Ling had spoken to that day combined, but he knew, at last, that he’d passed. When he returned from Ye, he would need to be more careful. After all, he couldn’t keep acting on his own without speaking to Mu Kuangda first.

He said goodbye to Mu Kuangda and stepped outside, where Wu Du was waiting. Duan Ling flashed him a smile—he’d succeeded.

“I’ll go see Mu Qing,” he said. “Since we’re leaving tomorrow.”

Wu Du nodded and followed him to Mu Qing’s quarters. Mu Qing was asleep, but Duan Ling waved the servants off and pushed the door open. He crept over to the bed and lay down next to Mu Qing.

The roosters were already starting to crow outside, the sky brightening.

“Mu Qing.”

Mu Qing turned over and opened his eyes a crack. “Ah, it’s you.”

“I’m leaving today,” Duan Ling said.

“Mm-hmm,” Mu Qing murmured, rolling back over onto his stomach to continue his slumber.

“Take care of yourself.”

Mu Qing had already begun to snore again—had he even heard a word Duan Ling said? Duan Ling laughed, got up, and left.

He stood outside in the morning-bright yard. He hadn’t slept a wink all night and felt himself growing truly irritable. Sun Ting, their guest, was already awake and tidying the courtyard for them.

Wu Du went inside to pack their things, calling back, “You should get a little sleep. We’ll meet everyone else at the city gates at noon.”

Duan Ling couldn’t stay awake a minute longer. He collapsed onto the divan and slipped off into slumber. The last thing he heard was Sun Ting asking Wu Du, “What’s wrong with the young master?”

Duan Ling didn’t hear him reply—but he must have put his finger to his lips for silence, because quiet settled over the room.

Sleeping deeply, Duan Ling woke at the touch of Wu Du’s hand. When he opened his eyes, he was surrounded by darkness. Wu Du’s lips met his, warm and soft; he passed some water from his mouth into Duan Ling’s. Thirsty after sleeping so long, Duan Ling swallowed. Wu Du fed him some more water, and Duan Ling drank it down as well.

Once the water was finished, Wu Du’s lips and tongue were left slightly cool; his tongue slid against Duan Ling’s as he deepened the kiss. Duan Ling had just woken up, and he slowly grew harder as they entwined; his breathing quickened, and he reached out a drowsy hand to touch Wu Du.

Duan Ling’s outer robe had been shed at some point, leaving him in only a single thin layer. He opened his eyes again and felt the divan beneath him shaking. A dim light came through the curtains, painting the small space he found himself in with an orange-yellow glow.

Wu Du was wearing white. He embraced Duan Ling, pressing him down into the divan with another kiss.

“Where are we?” Duan Ling asked, noting that everything around him seemed to be rattling.

“Shh.” The corner of Wu Du’s mouth quirked up. “In the carriage.”

Duan Ling was immediately wide awake. They were on the road already? He felt like he still had a lot of things to finish, yet they’d already left.

“You seemed so tired,” Wu Du said. “I didn’t want to wake you. I carried you in here.”

“You did?” Duan Ling murmured.

The carriage contained a small divan, barely large enough for a single person to sleep on; with the two of them embracing there, it was cramped. Duan Ling rose up on his knees on the divan, lifted the curtain, and looked

outside. Squinting against the setting sun, he saw that they were already on the official road.

Wu Du wrapped an arm around his waist, pulled him backward, and drew him down to kiss him again. “Nobody’s around,” he whispered. “And nobody will interrupt.”

Duan Ling was kissed so hard his body went hot. His cheeks burned with embarrassment—but Wu Du was merciless. He ran a hand over Duan Ling’s spine, nuzzling his nose against Duan Ling’s as their lips and tongues intertwined.

A rush of novelty and excitement surged through Duan Ling.

Sunset illuminated the official road, washing it in gold. The early summer evening seemed to sparkle. Their convoy traveled down the road, leaving Jiang Prefectural City behind and heading north.

Inside the carriage, they were both breathing hard. Wu Du swiftly stripped off Duan Ling’s clothes. Duan Ling hadn’t been fully naked in front of him since he’d accepted Wu Du’s love token, and he could hardly meet his eyes. Wu Du sat up with him in his arms and bent to close his lips over Duan Ling’s nipple, teasing it lightly with his tongue.

Duan Ling’s face flushed. He raised himself up on his knees, looking down at Wu Du. Then he brought a hand to Wu Du’s chin and tilted it up. They kissed again until Wu Du broke away to mouth his way down Duan Ling’s chest.

Duan Ling practiced archery, and his shoulders and back were beautifully muscled, his waist toned. The planes of his chest were lean, and the clean lines of his abdomen stood out clearly. Wu Du kissed his flat stomach, then continued downward.

“D-don’t!” Duan Ling yelped, overwrought with nerves. His whole body stiffened when he felt Wu Du’s tongue on him.

Wu Du laughed, and Duan Ling’s blush darkened. He was naked, but Wu Du was still wearing a layer of clothes, making him even more embarrassed. “Aren’t you going to take yours off too?” he whispered.

Wu Du gazed up at him seriously. Incredibly self-conscious and thinking the whole situation unfair, Duan Ling tugged at the string holding

his top closed. Wu Du, feeling generous, stripped himself naked and opened his legs to let Duan Ling see his thick cock, already stiff with arousal.

“We’re lovers already, so what’s there to be embarrassed about?” he said.

Duan Ling’s breath stopped in his throat. They drank in the sight of each other’s bare bodies. Wu Du’s muscles were strong and clearly defined; his masculine beauty aroused Duan Ling even more.

“Like what you see?” Wu Du whispered in Duan Ling’s ear. “You can look your fill, you little pervert. The way you couldn’t keep your hands off me, I just knew you liked men.”

Wu Du’s cock was girthy and powerful, its erect tip brushing his navel. Duan Ling wrapped his fingers around it and gently stroked. Wu Du exhaled, his breath hot, then gathered Duan Ling into his arms, guiding him to lie down.

“Turn over,” he whispered.

Duan Ling did, rolling onto his stomach so Wu Du could embrace him from behind, his cock rubbing against his buttocks. Hugging each other close while skin-to-skin, rubbing and caressing, brought Duan Ling an immediate rush of pleasure.

“Do you like it?” Wu Du whispered in his ear.

“Mm… I like it.” Duan Ling turned his head and kissed Wu Du, then reached around to run his hand across Wu Du’s waist and ass.

Wu Du squeezed Duan Ling tighter, rubbing against him for a while before murmuring, “I’m putting it in.”

“In?” Duan Ling said, his heart thundering. “How?”

Wu Du turned and grabbed a small box from under the divan. He opened the case to reveal fragrant ointment inside. Duan Ling sniffed it while Wu Du smeared some onto his cock, then more onto Duan Ling. Without another word, he pressed the head of his cock against Duan Ling’s entrance and began slowly pushing in.

They were both exceedingly nervous. Duan Ling’s most urgent thought was, *Aaahhhh it hurts! It hurts, it hurts!*

Being stretched open like this made him tremble uncontrollably; he nearly cried out.

“Does it hurt?” Wu Du asked.

Duan Ling panted wordlessly, enduring the pain. This was too different from what he’d imagined. How could anyone enjoy being treated like this? There was no pleasure in it—but for Wu Du, he could bear the discomfort.

Wu Du stilled his movements, his chest pressed to Duan Ling’s back. Duan Ling could feel the rhythmic thump of his heart. “If it hurts, we’ll stop,” Wu Du said.

Duan Ling turned his head. “N-no, it doesn’t hurt.”

“There are tears in your eyes,” Wu Du said with a guilty twinge. “Forget it.”

“No,” Duan Ling murmured. Maybe there was something wrong—maybe if he was patient, it would be fine in a bit. He put a hand on Wu Du’s hip to stop him from pulling out and kissed him.

“I love you,” Duan Ling said. “I want to…with you—keep going, Wu Du.”

Wu Du’s breathing quickened, but he didn’t dare move for fear of hurting Duan Ling. He held still as Duan Ling adjusted to the feeling. After a few deep breaths, Duan Ling already felt better. The sharp pain had shifted into a more bearable ache.

“Give…give me a little more,” he whispered.

Wu Du’s throat bobbed. He canted his hips slightly and sank deeper, until his thick cock was fully sheathed inside. A strange feeling washed over Duan Ling, as if in that moment, they had merged into one.

“Does it still hurt?” Wu Du asked.

“N-no.” Duan Ling closed his eyes, feeling Wu Du pulsing inside him. It *had* hurt at the start, but now that Wu Du was all the way in, it felt comfortable—even good.

Wu Du slowly withdrew, then thrust back inside, drawing a sharp moan from Duan Ling. The sound excited Wu Du, and he gasped for breath as he ran his hands over Duan Ling’s chest and pinched his nipples. He moved lower, pressing a hand to Duan Ling’s firm abdomen before sliding

down to take Duan Ling's cock in hand. He pumped in and out slowly, fingers wrapped around Duan Ling.

Duan Ling moaned.

The sound was involuntary, seemingly driven from him by Wu Du. Wu Du thrust shallowly a few more times, and Duan Ling's spine tingled, the sensation seeping gradually through his limbs. The deeper Wu Du went, the more strongly his own body reacted.

"You're hard again," Wu Du said, surprised. He laughed. "Is it good?"

"It…" Duan Ling couldn't describe what he was feeling. He swallowed hard. "Pretty good… It feels—great."

"Yeah? It really feels good?"

Wu Du stroked his fingers up Duan Ling's cock and pinched the sensitive tip. As he built up a steady rhythm, a clear fluid began leaking from Duan Ling.

"Aaahhh—" Duan Ling's voice rose in pitch, his moan turning into a cut-off gasp.

Wu Du picked up his pace, hips moving faster. Whenever he drove in deep, shudders racked Duan Ling. Arousal seemed to pool low in his belly, building and spreading. Another moan slipped from him, and he craned his neck to look back at Wu Du. Wu Du braced himself with a hand on the bed and helped him turn around, hooking Duan Ling's legs around his waist. He settled Duan Ling onto his back with his legs spread wide, gazing down at him as he drove in again.

Duan Ling's face blazed with heat. Both of them were completely nude, and the sight of Wu Du raking his eyes over his bare body was mortifying—but he was already addicted to this feeling. He shivered with every thrust.

Wu Du was flushed, too, but he seemed to be enjoying Duan Ling's shy expression. He leaned down and captured his lips, murmuring against his mouth, "Do you like it?"

"I like it," Duan Ling breathed. "Wu Du, kiss me again."

Wu Du kissed him with single-minded focus. When he drew back, Duan Ling took his chance to gaze at Wu Du's body in turn. He was lost in pleasure, his emotions swelling and cresting; tears sprang into his eyes.

Startled, Wu Du hugged him tight. "Why are you crying?"

Duan Ling tried to hold back, but he couldn't. Wu Du pressed down on him and kissed him again as he worked his hips in a firm rhythm. Duan Ling's tears flowed freely, and he whined, unable to form words. His reactions only spurred Wu Du on. Blood rushed to his cock, and his tongue slid against Duan Ling's as he invaded him with tyrannical fervor, his pace growing frenzied.

Beneath Wu Du's powerful thrusting, Duan Ling tipped over the edge; sparks shot down his spine as he reached his climax. His cock felt swollen and sore, oozing a steady stream of cum. Even after several long minutes, though the intensity had faded, he still clenched hot around Wu Du.

Wu Du's breath brushed his ear. "I came."

Duan Ling blushed as he looked down at the mess on Wu Du's front and his own, surrounded by that intoxicating scent.

"You should…put some clothes on," Wu Du said, starting to feel embarrassed himself as he helped Duan Ling drape a robe over his shoulders.

Duan Ling ducked his head, equally bashful. Once he was somewhat more decent, Wu Du grabbed a robe for himself as well. Neither of them said anything.

Wu Du wiped himself clean with a cloth, then wrapped his arms around Duan Ling from behind and wiped his stomach. "Does it still hurt?"

"N-no," Duan Ling replied.

Wu Du gave it a moment's thought and said, "I'll…get some water to wipe you down properly."

"It's fine," Duan Ling said. "It can wait until we arrive."

"We should be nearly at the post house," Wu Du said. "I'll go take a look."

Wu Du's cheeks were pink. Just as he was about to leave, he seemed to remember something. He whirled and planted a firm kiss on Duan Ling's lips, then covered Duan Ling with the fallen quilt.

Duan Ling lips tugged up in a bemused smile. He lifted the curtain and peered out; Wu Du jumped down from the carriage, which stopped for a while, then headed down the road again. A few houses stood in the distance, and Duan Ling could even see the hint of villages on the further horizon. At last, they arrived at the post house.

Traveling with them were Sun Ting, Yan Di, Lin Yunqi and his family, Wang Zheng, and about twenty of Wang Zheng's former comrades whom Mu Kuangda had commanded to join them. They were thirty or forty people all together, with six carriages and several horses on leads behind them.

The moment their large group came through the gates, the post house became lively. Duan Ling's neck was still flushed after their activities in the carriage, and he had a distracted look. The members of their company streaming by all bowed and called him "my lord," which flustered him further; he simply nodded in response. When he hurried into the post house and saw a waiter setting out tea wares, he quickly offered to help.

As the busy waiter bustled to and fro, Duan Ling handed out a stack of bowls to his fellow travelers and went to pour the water himself.

His actions frightened his men so much that they rushed forward to take the pitcher from his hands. "My lord, sit! I'll do it. Let me!"

As Duan Ling took a seat behind a folding screen, he caught the sound of children playing. He glanced out from behind it and spotted a pair of siblings from the Lin family, an adorable boy and girl, who filled the air with their spirited chatter. He couldn't help wondering whether Wu Du would be a father by now if he had been allowed to marry. He cast his gaze toward Wu Du, and as if sensing Duan Ling's thoughts, Wu Du met his eyes before glancing away.

Wu Du turned back toward the group and ordered Wang Zheng's men to go on patrol. Not only had Wang Zheng served as an assistant prefect, he'd been on campaigns with the army too. Though his fighting skills were nothing special, he was comfortable on the battlefield. Wu Du handed out a few more tasks, assigning men to stand guard nearby, then went to check if

the food in the kitchen was clean and make the rest of the arrangements for their stay.

After a brief flurry of activity—during which the waiter brought a bowl of noodles to each person—the post house fell quiet as everyone busied themselves eating. Yan Di had even called for a little wine; everyone chatted among themselves. Duan Ling was the leader of this party; his subordinates weren't yet familiar with his temper, so everyone was treading carefully.

Duties discharged, Wu Du took a seat across from Duan Ling and commented, "It's not as good as the World's Best Noodle Shop, but it'll do. Before we left, I asked Zheng Yan for some recipes. We'll sort out food once we get to Ye."

Duan Ling was touched by his effort.

Seeing Duan Ling distracted, Wu Du chided him: "Eat, eat."

"You should eat some more too," Duan Ling said, giving Wu Du some noodles from his own bowl. "Are you tired?"

Wu Du, abruptly reminded of their impromptu tryst, nearly spat out his noodles. His face flushed, and he couldn't help laughing. "I need to eat so I have more stamina—is that it?" Wu Du said, gazing at Duan Ling with a wicked twinkle in his eye.

Duan Ling felt heat creeping up his cheeks again and took a sip of tea to cover his fluster. They sat cross-legged, facing each other across their cups and bowls. Beneath the table, Wu Du extended his leg and set his foot casually on Duan Ling's knee. Duan Ling pushed him off, and Wu Du put it back. After a few rounds of this, Duan Ling gave up and let him do as he pleased.

Duan Ling was drifting in a post-meal daze when Lin Yunqi came over and nodded. "My lord, would you like to see the accounts?"

Only then did Duan Ling remember that the court had approved funds for his journey—it was impossible for them to let him leave with nothing. Duan Ling had yet to establish his administration in Ye, so Lin Yunqi was temporarily in charge of the accounts, including looking after their current funds. When they'd exited the carriages, someone had brought in the chests

for safekeeping. Given there was no bank house in Ye capable of exchanging money, they had all been packed with silver.

“Show me the total,” Duan Ling said. “And show me the list of names for our party.”

Their group comprised thirty-seven people all told, with Lin Yunqi’s family making up nearly half of that. Wang Zheng’s comrades, who were to handle miscellaneous affairs and serve as errand boys for the new governor, accounted for the other large group. The four remaining members were the carpenter Yan Di; Sun Ting, the soldier who had originally come from Ye; Wu Du; and Duan Ling himself. Duan Ling guessed Lin Yunqi must’ve received instructions from Mu Kuangda to move himself to Hebei and not return, so he’d brought his entire clan along.

Wang Zheng, on the other hand, was following Duan Ling for a fresh start. Perhaps he would also stay if all went well.

Duan Ling had to consider everyone’s individual skills and needs. When Shi Qi arrived after being released from prison, there would be another accountant—making for a total of thirty-eight people. Mu Kuangda didn’t seem concerned with whom Duan Ling chose to manage the money—perhaps he knew any officials sent on assignment out of the capital would skim off the top, so he felt no need to keep too close an eye on it.

A new sense of responsibility settled over Duan Ling. Bringing so many people to a city full of strangers… He couldn’t let them grow poor or sick, or die. In the past he’d spoken of his family, the nation, the world—but the words weighed heavier when there were so many people to consider. The thirty-seven people in front of him were a real and unavoidable burden on his shoulders.

After he looked everything over, it was time for bed. He could only hope everything would go smoothly.

Duan Ling noticed Wu Du peeking around the screen again. “Is there something out there?” he asked.

“Go to sleep,” Wu Du said. “All’s well.”

They lay together behind the screen. The post house’s lamps had been snuffed, and moonlight streamed in through the windows. Their journey this time was an urgent one; their accommodations on the road were plain, and

the further north they went, the worse they could expect conditions to become. At this post house there weren't even separate rooms; everyone ate and slept in the same central hall.

Duan Ling laid his head on Wu Du's shoulder. A thin blanket covered them both. In the silence of the night, Wu Du laced his fingers with Duan Ling's and—knowing he wasn't asleep yet—pressed a kiss to his lips. He leaned in, as if to murmur something in Duan Ling's ear. Duan Ling lifted his head slightly to listen, not expecting him to whisper: "Tomorrow, Laoye will fuck you so hard you can't walk."

Duan Ling was rendered speechless.

Wu Du laughed, rolled onto his side, and wrapped his arms around Duan Ling. Duan Ling felt their lower bodies pressed against each other through their thin pants as they exchanged lazy kisses in the dark. If they didn't get some rest, they would be dead on their feet tomorrow. Reluctantly, they went to sleep.

Five li away, a dozen black-robed men's bodies lay scattered over the ground. Another black-robed man bent over them. After wiping his sword clean on the nearest corpse, he removed a bronze badge from each body—the exclusive tokens of the shadow squad. The assassin gathered their weapons and dumped them into the river, then dragged the bodies into a pile in the field next to the road. He added some wood, then sat down beside his handiwork to eat.

Once he'd finished his meal, the man brushed the crumbs from his clothes and whistled at the birds that came to peck over them by the light of the moon. He lay down to sleep.

He didn't set fire to the pile of corpses until dawn.

It was summer, the time for harvesting and planting. Numerous farmers burned straw along this road, the thick smoke rising high into the skies, and so pedestrians on the road paid no mind to one more fire. When the assassin had burned the bodies, he set out again, heading north with a bag over his shoulder, jingling with bronze badges.

Chapter 128

IN JIANG PREFECTURAL CITY, it was a balmy summer night: After heavy downpours, the rainy season had ended, and mid-summer had at last arrived. The floods that had tormented the emperor and his court officials had left too many mouths to feed. As the weather grew hotter, the corpses of pigs, horses, cattle, dogs, fish, and even people that had washed up and scattered on the river's banks outside the city began to rot and smell. There had been no time to clear them away.

Under these conditions, pestilence was bound to spread. The city was busy dealing with the bodies of the drowned; the Black-Plated Army worked day and night to do what they could. Petitions from refugees from all over the nation flowed into Jiang Prefectural City and were sent to the Grand Secretariat. Once the ministers had made their comments, the petitions were handed to Li Yanqiu for approval.

Four shifts of Black-Plated Army soldiers took turns guarding Li Yanqiu. Every hour, a soldier would report to the palace; late that night, the soldier on duty reported that Xie You had requested an audience.

Li Yanqiu sent the soldier out at once to summon him in.

The Xie You who arrived was armorless, dressed in casual robes. He stood in the imperial study, waiting for Li Yanqiu to speak. The emperor and his official were both silent for a moment, the whisper of pages turning the only sound in the room.

Eventually Li Yanqiu put his brush down and lifted his head from the pile of memorials.

"What is the crown prince doing now?" Li Yanqiu asked.

"Reviewing memorials," Xie You said. "He's been more diligent with military affairs recently."

The guards from the Black-Plated Army had brought over a sheaf of memorials from the Eastern Palace, which Xie You handed over. Over the past several days, Cai Yan had assumed charge of the more routine government affairs while Li Yanqiu devoted his time to dealing with the

flood. The Grand Secretariat had already filtered through them all, but Li Yanqiu still checked a few of the memorials Cai Yan had reviewed.

Li Yanqiu flipped open the one at the top of the stack, his gaze landing on the characters inked at the bottom.

“We seem to recall the crown prince wrote several letters when he first returned to our palace,” Li Yanqiu said. “One was a letter mourning the late emperor, which he presented to the imperial ancestral temple. Xie You, have it brought over so we can have a look.”

Xie You frowned but asked no questions. He sent another guard scurrying to retrieve it. After a short wait, a Black-Plated soldier arrived with a yellow brocade letter for Xie You, who presented it to Li Yanqiu with both hands.

Li Yanqiu spread the yellow brocade out and weighed it down with a jade pendant. His eyes swept across the lines until they fell at last upon the *Li* character in the phrase *the Li family’s nation*.

The lamps in the Eastern Palace were still glowing. Cai Yan propped his head up with one hand as he almost fell asleep on the memorial he was drowsily reading.

“Your Highness?” Feng Duo inquired.

“What time is it?” Cai Yan asked.

“Around midnight. You should rest, Your Highness. We have to prepare for morning court soon.”

“There isn’t enough time to sleep,” Cai Yan said. “Wuluohou Mu.”

Lang Junxia, seated to the side, grunted in response.

“Bring my jade pendant here so I have it for court later,” he said.

Lang Junxia stood and left the room, leaving the hall silent. Feng Duo retrieved a warm towel and wiped Cai Yan’s hands.

“Any news?” Cai Yan asked quietly.

“Three shadow squad teams have been dispatched,” Feng Duo said, keeping his voice low. “A total of forty-eight men, led by Baili, Linghu, and

Nangong. Within a month, they will overtake him on his way to Ye and lay an ambush at the foot of Mount Zheshi.”

The shadow squad had been established by the founding emperor of Southern Chen. At any time it contained exactly one hundred men, each assigned an alias that was a name from the *Hundred Family Surnames*.[3] Regardless of what their real names had been before joining the shadow squad, they would be buried upon admittance to the group.

Forty-eight assassins were hiding out there in the dark, able to send back messages should there be any change in the situation. Cai Yan felt significant relief at the thought. Spirits lifted, he applied himself to the memorials with a fresh burst of energy. Shortly thereafter, Lang Junxia came back with the jade pendant, and Cai Yan and Feng Duo said no more on the subject, having already reached an understanding.

Lang Junxia glanced at Cai Yan and said nothing.

The official road was lush and green in the summertime. Almost a month had passed since Duan Ling had set out from Jiang Prefectural City, and the further north they traveled, the milder and more pleasant the weather. He had slowly started to put names to the faces in his group, and could now call out to them all individually. In front of everyone else, Wu Du behaved like a loyal guardian, even more serious about it than he had been at the prime minister’s manor. He never crossed the line. Sometimes, in the interest of keeping an eye on their party during the day, he rode on horseback instead of the carriage, cantering up and down the line. Yet whenever Duan Ling was napping, he appeared in the carriage again to watch over him.

Wu Du had been appointed the commandant of Hejian, and so everyone addressed him as *sir*; Duan Ling had been appointed the governor of Hebei, and so everyone called him *my lord*. They spoke rarely before watchful eyes, and even when they did, Wu Du stuck to reporting the details of their journey along the road.

Whenever they stopped to rest, children from nearby family residences, curious about their party, clustered around. The young governor took the opportunity to descend from his carriage and teach them how to knock green plums off the trees by the roadside with slingshots and eat

them when success was had. Wu Du, in turn, sat cross-legged on a rock and told the children stories about the late emperor's greatest battles. Once, he vividly described how the late emperor had thought he'd shot a vicious tiger to death during the night, only to discover it was only a stone once day broke. Another time, he described how the late emperor led his troops through the desert while telling the soldiers that a grove of plum trees awaited them just ahead, so that everyone stopped feeling their thirst so keenly.

As Duan Ling listened to it all, he was never sure whether he should laugh or cry. The stories he was hearing had nothing to do with his father, but had been somehow assigned to him anyway; it turned out that timeworn tales of Cao Cao's soldiers daydreaming of plum trees to quench their thirst or the famed Flying General shooting a rock could be shaped into new stories.

Duan Ling always took his seat by another large rock nearby, drinking plum tea to cool himself in his heavy scholarly robes. Though he was only sixteen and still had the delicate looks of a youth, his manner and bearing carried an aura that couldn't be underestimated.

At such times, he would direct his gaze across the road, watching Wu Du. Once Wu Du finished his tale, he would stand up and shoo the children off before striding toward Duan Ling under the scattered sunlight. Tall and handsome, he would gesture for Duan Ling to return to his carriage—claiming a kiss after he saw him inside, then turning and hopping onto Skychaser to patrol and protect the group.

Sometimes, if they stayed overnight in a town or city with an inn large enough to rent separate rooms, Wu Du would creep into Duan Ling's in the dead of night. He would rush in like a gale, bolt the door, and sweep Duan Ling into his arms without a word, pressing him down onto the bed to kiss him breathless. They whispered words of love in each other's ears, but treated their time alone together as precious; they weren't willing to spend it talking, preferring to use their lips and tongues for other pursuits. When they were sated, they entwined their limbs together in sleep. Traveling was impossible in the rain; on those days, Wu Du would stay in the room, carefully reading the list of recipes Zheng Yan had given him, and keep Duan Ling company.

And just like that, for a month, the group made their way north, the scenery turning more and more desolate around them. Finally, as summer began to turn to autumn, they arrived at the border of Hebei.

They paused for a rest at the boundary marker. It was raining heavily that day; there was no village in front of them and no inn behind, and their wheels were stuck in the mud. Duan Ling exited the carriage, braving the rain to set his shoulder against it and push with everyone else.

“What’s wrong?!” Wu Du, who had been scouting ahead, rushed back through the rain when he saw Duan Ling. “Get back in the carriage!”

“The wheel is stuck!” Duan Ling yelled back.

Rain sluiced down around them. Wu Du worried Duan Ling would come down with a cold from standing around in the downpour. He grabbed the axle with one hand himself and hauled it backward with a shout, dragging the thousand-catty carriage out of the muck.

“Stop that!” Duan Ling scolded. “You’ll injure yourself!”

Wu Du massaged his shoulder, stretched the joint, and said, “It’s fine! Stay in the carriage!”

A streak of lightning cut through the gloomy sky. They couldn’t get any further tonight; their only choice was to find what shelter they could in the mountains and weather the storm. Wu Du went to check on the others and came back drenched to the skin.

“Let’s keep going!” Lin Yunqi said. “Look for a creek—a cave would work!”

“No!” Yan Di countered, “It’s too dangerous! It’s pissing down; we can’t go marching all over the mountain in this mess. We should go back the way we came!”

Yan Di was drunk, and had been woken from his sleep by the damp. Even so, Wu Du took his advice, asking everyone to turn and head for the nearby woods instead.

Not long after they moved back down into the forest, an avalanche of yellow mud crashed down from the top of a distant peak. Dirt mixed with rocks cascaded down, covering the road.

What a close call, Duan Ling thought. *If I'd insisted on continuing, we might have lost everything.*

The woods were dark, and wild gales dashed the rain into their eyes. While the trees didn't block much, they were at least able to escape the biting cold of the wind. Wu Du had them circle the carriages and directed everyone take their rest inside the resultant shelter. After assigning a few men to stand guard and handle patrols, he climbed into the carriage with Duan Ling.

"We'll have to make do here for the night. Good thing we listened to Yan Di," Wu Du said.

"I told you to not be so stubborn," Duan Ling said, frowning at Wu Du's shoulder. "Now let me see."

"It's fine," Wu Du said. But he'd grabbed the axle awkwardly earlier, and his shoulder was an irritable red. Obediently, he shrugged off his outer robe and crossed his arms, exposing the taut muscles of his back. Duan Ling applied a bruise-relieving patch.

"A kiss," Wu Du said, then turned his head to capture Duan Ling's lips. Duan Ling wound his arms around his waist and lowered his head to drop a kiss on his muscular shoulder.

"We'll make it to Hejian tomorrow," Wu Du said. "So let's have a good night. Drink some ginger soup to stave off a cold."

"I won't get sick," Duan Ling said. "I'm not as weak as you think. No one's going to be moving around in the rain tonight. Don't go back outside. Let the others do the patrols."

"I feel better keeping an eye on things."

Duan Ling couldn't convince him, so he let Wu Du step back into the rain. He sat down on the divan, damp all over. There was no way to light a fire in the carriage, so he stripped off his robes, baring his chest, and changed into a pair of dry pants. He stretched out and closed his eyes to rest.

In the middle of the night, Wu Du returned and joined Duan Ling on the divan. His body heat warmed Duan Ling through, and they wrapped one another in a tight embrace. Duan Ling fell asleep without another thought.

Some time later, Duan Ling's eyes flew open.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

"What?" Wu Du sat up immediately. He too had stripped down to the waist. He frowned. "What did you hear? Is there something out there?"

Duan Ling thought he'd heard the faint sound of horses' hooves, but it had disappeared as soon as he opened his eyes.

"Don't scare me like that," Wu Du said, anxious. "What did you hear?"

Duan Ling shook his head. Confused, he said, "It must have been a dream."

Wu Du pulled the Radiant White Tiger Armor back onto Duan Ling before doing anything else. He was about to step outside and do a circuit of the camp when Duan Ling tugged at his hand to pull him back down onto the divan. "Laoye, don't be so jumpy."

"I have to protect you. If anything were to happen to you, it would be the death of me."

Duan Ling gazed up at him, tracing a finger across Wu Du's handsome face. The longer he looked, the more he liked what he saw. He never would've imagined he would fall in love with Wu Du, but somehow, it seemed like he'd gotten everything he wished for.

Wu Du looked steadily at Duan Ling, his brows knit with worry. "You've had it hard on this journey."

"I had it hard when I was young," Duan Ling said lightly. "I think things are much better now—"

He stopped and cocked his head. "Wait. There it is again."

He'd heard it clearly this time—the sound of horses' hooves. He had been lying on his side with one ear pressed to the divan, which was secured to the carriage floor; beneath them, the wheels rested against a large stone on the ground. The faraway sounds of something thundering over the earth vibrated through the wood into his ears.

Duan Ling beckoned to Wu Du. "Come and listen."

Wu Du only had to listen for half a heartbeat before he said, “There are troops less than five li away, and they’re coming closer—hurry!”

“They might not be coming for us!” Duan Ling protested.

Nevertheless they jumped off the carriage, woke everyone in their party, and retreated with the carriages and horses deeper into the woods. Duan Ling pressed his ear back to the ground.

“They went around us,” Duan Ling announced in a hushed voice. “We’re not their target!”

The rain had stopped, and the night had gone strangely quiet. Only a faint, muffled sound rustled in the distance.

Something was afoot. Duan Ling knew of only one thing that would make that sound: horse hooves wrapped in cloth for a surprise attack in the night rain.

“Wang Zheng,” Wu Du said, already in motion, “choose ten men to stay behind; hide yourselves well. Everyone else who can fight, with us!”

Wu Du swung up onto Skychaser and extended a hand; Duan Ling grabbed it and jumped astride the horse. He settled in a firm seat behind Wu Du, longbow slung across his back, and they galloped off.

Under the pitch-black cover of night, a group of Yuan soldiers was sneaking toward the nearby city of Hejian.

Chapter 129

“EVERYONE, STOP HERE!” Wu Du made a sharp gesture with both hands, signaling that everyone should dismount. They’d sighted the Yuan forces; any closer and they’d be detected. He tore off strips from his robe to wrap Skychaser’s hooves, and the men followed suit.

“How do we fight them?” Duan Ling asked.

He’d only purposely fought the Mongols once—when he and his father had attacked a troop of them in the Altyn-Tagh Mountains.

“No matter what, we can’t do anything rash,” Wu Du replied. “Count how many men there are first.”

“I’d guess about a thousand.”

“I meant on our side.”

“Twelve.”

If only they had one more, they would be like the legendary Thirteen of Kunyang who had rallied their forces against an army of thousands. Duan Ling calculated their odds. If they had thirteen Li Jianhongs, they might stand a chance—but there were only two of them and ten cavalrymen from the capital, including Sun Ting. How could they fight a thousand Mongols?

“We wait until they split their forces,” Wu Du said, seeming to sense his thoughts.

“How do you know they will?”

“They definitely will. If my guess is right, they’ll attack the city from all four gates.”

It was just as Wu Du predicted—once they arrived on the plain just outside Hejian, the Yuan army began dividing their forces.

“We’ll follow the soldiers in the middle,” Wu Du said. “Let’s go!”

Wu Du rode with Duan Ling and led their ten cavalrymen forward, tracking a group of Mongol soldiers. Their immediate target was obvious:

the enemy commander leading the troops. The Mongol soldiers circled around to the north side of Hejian, and Wu Du followed, leading his ten men into a sparsely wooded area outside the city.

“We’re not going to warn the city?” Duan Ling asked.

Wu Du made a shushing gesture and gave orders to his men. “Cut some branches. Prepare torches to stick into the ground.”

It was quiet outside the city. The Yuan soldiers dismounted one after another in the woods, sorting their equipment, then throwing grappling hooks toward the top of the city wall. Hejian was poorly guarded. No soldiers stood on the watchtowers—heaven knew if they were off drinking somewhere—and only two braziers were lit.

Wu Du waited for two groups of soldiers to climb the city walls. When the third group was halfway up, he whispered: “Go! Quiet as you can.”

Though they were only twelve in number, they came out of the darkness like a wave of death, arrows flying. The first soldier that dropped went without so much as a cry. The Mongols had never expected someone might attack them from behind. They turned, disorganized, shouting a warning as they tried to engage their assailants.

Meanwhile, the defenders on the city wall hadn’t even noticed the ambush.

Wu Du, with Duan Ling clutching his waist, spurred Skychaser toward the enemy. Flashblade sang from its sheath. Directing the horse with only his knees, he swept his sword in a wide arc. Wherever Flashblade flew, a man fell from his horse. Wu Du grabbed Duan Ling one-handed, and they both leaned hard to the side; in the next breath, the sword flashed, blood splattered, and a Yuan soldier screamed in agony, cleaved in two.

The shriek gave away their position. Arrows whistled toward them—but Skychaser was well-trained. He reared back, colliding with the Mongol horses.

An enemy soldier slashed at Duan Ling, who shouted in Mongolian, “Stop, we’re on the same side! Same side!”

The soldier hesitated, and with a sweep of Wu Du's hand, his head tumbled from his body.

Mongolian horses were normally short and stocky, while Skychaser was a tall and treasured Wusun horse. Skychaser easily knocked the other mount aside. Duan Ling reached for an arrow. An instant later, the enemy horse whinnied and collapsed, fletching sprouting from its side. He nocked another. With practiced hands, Duan Ling shot the mount first and the man second. The screams of horses rose from all around as the soldiers' mounts were shot out from under them.

"Retreat!" Wu Du called. He wheeled Skychaser around, racing toward the safety of the trees.

The Mongols galloped after them. Duan Ling nocked an arrow and bent backward, lying flat over Skychaser's back. The world turned upside down. Duan Ling let fly—the leader of the crowd of pursuers toppled off his horse.

Their party rushed into the woods, darting among the trees.

"How many are we? Count off!" Wu Du said.

One, five, ten… They hadn't lost a single man.

"Is anyone hurt?" Duan Ling asked.

Two cavalrymen had sustained minor wounds, but both resolutely replied, "We can still fight! Your orders, sir!"

"The wounded will remain here for support," Wu Du said. "Light the torches!"

Their pursuers had stopped at the edge of the trees and didn't dare enter the woods. One by one, their men lit the makeshift torches, until the wood was filled with light. To the Mongols, it seemed as if hundreds of soldiers had appeared among the trees. The Yuan soldiers retreated at once, whispering to each other in confusion.

"*Charge!*" Wu Du roared.

Skychaser leapt forward. The enemy panicked; cries of warning went up as they turned tail and ran.

"Get down!" Duan Ling shouted.

Wu Du pressed himself to Skychaser’s neck as Duan Ling loosed six arrows in rapid succession. The struck Yuan soldiers slid off their horses, and Wu Du shouted again, “Retreat!”

Their cavalry reined their horses around and shot back into the trees.

“Fuck!” One of their men couldn’t hold back anymore and swore aloud. “All this running away! Just let me kill the bastards!”

“What’s your name?” Wu Du asked.

The cavalryman promptly shut his mouth.

“Another word and I’ll have you court-martialed,” Wu Du snapped. As Duan Ling suppressed a snicker, Wu Du furrowed his brow and muttered, “Damn it, why hasn’t anyone in Hejian reacted?!”

Hejian was still shrouded in darkness. They’d made plenty of noise in the skirmish just now, yet nobody had come to help. Wu Du had assumed the city guard would notice and at least deploy some archers to the walls once the fighting started, even if nobody actually came out of the gates—but no one had shot a single arrow. He didn’t expect they’d simply play dead.

The Yuan soldiers seemed to be observing the situation too. They had drawn back but not fled. Duan Ling couldn’t help thinking that their enemy was unusually calm in the face of danger. If it was any other army, they would’ve given up the ambush and retreated by now, assuming the city garrison had discovered their plans.

An enemy soldier yelled in Mongolian, “There’s just a few of them—they’re only a decoy! Kill them!”

Duan Ling was the only one who understood his words. “They’re coming!” he cried. “Time to go!”

“Burn it!” Wu Du roared.

The Yuan army rushed into the woods. Duan Ling’s men scattered and pulled the torches from the ground, throwing them into the trees on all sides. The wood caught with a crackle. It had just rained; as the damp leaves ignited, smoke filled the air. Wu Du fished out a bottle and hurled it against the nearest tree.

The bottle exploded with a *boom*, and a fierce fire swallowed the trees. Thick smoke billowed toward the Yuan soldiers who were just entering the woods.

“Toward the city wall!” Wu Du yelled.

At long last, Hejian realized there were enemies at their gates.

“Ambush!” a soldier on the city wall shouted. The gong crashed, and the braziers on Hejian’s city wall lit up one after another. Finally, arrows rained down.

Wu Du cursed. “Don’t shoot us, damn you! We’re with you!”

The arrows ceased just as the remaining Yuan soldiers rushed out of the woods in chaos. Judging by their numbers, nearly half the enemy had fallen prey to the poisonous smoke in the woods.

At that moment, the city gate opened, and the garrison troops poured out, rushing toward Duan Ling.

“Stop!” Afraid they’d accidentally kill their own people, Duan Ling took up the cry. “We’re on your side! Your side! Kill the Yuan army, out there!”

Duan Ling grabbed Wu Du’s arm before he could slash at the defense troops of Hejian. “No more fighting! Head to the city wall!”

Their cavalry broke formation and hid in a protected area at the base of the wall, dodging to avoid being splashed by boiling oil from the top of the battlements. As more and more of the city guard rushed out of the gates, the Yuan army began to retreat in earnest. A clamor went up as the alarm was raised—Hejian had at last woken up. At the other city gates, the soldiers sprang into action as they realized the enemy was attacking.

“Who are you?” the commander shouted over the distance.

“Go fight! Don’t mind us!” Duan Ling hollered back.

Apparently the commander took him at his word; he led his men to charge toward another city gate in support.

Dawn was breaking, and the smoke in the woods had begun to clear. As more soldiers from Hejian came out to join the battle, Duan Ling told them there were still more enemy troops and led them into the woods with

the rest of his men. Everyone dismounted and watched as the bodies—both dead and alive—were dragged from the trees.

“Haul them to the city gate,” Duan Ling commanded. “If the Yuan soldiers come again, hang the corpses from the walls. Take the survivors as prisoners.”

A deputy general squeezed through the crowd. “Who are you people? Are you all from Jiangnan?”

“The newly appointed Hejian commandant and governor of Hebei,” Wu Du replied.

Stunned, the Hejian soldiers hurriedly saluted Wu Du and Duan Ling—suddenly the highest ranked officials in Hebei.

“Send a few people down to the mountain where the landslide occurred last night,” Duan Ling said. “I have more men waiting in the forest there. Bring them back to Hejian; we’ll stay in the city for now. Ask for Lin Yunqi—he’ll have our appointment letters.”

As the deputy general left to carry out his order, Wu Du looked around at the crowd of soldiers. “Who was in charge last night?”

Another deputy stepped forward. “Lieutenant Qin was in command—the man who asked who you were last night. He just left for the southern gate to clean up the battlefield there.”

“Take a few men over and arrest him,” Wu Du said. “He deserted his post.”

The deputy didn’t dare protest. Duan Ling and Wu Du shared a glance—these men were covering for someone.

“Maybe you should go in person,” Duan Ling said.

Wu Du nodded. “Head into the city without me.”

“Got it,” Duan Ling said.

Wu Du rode away on Skychaser. Duan Ling asked Sun Ting to check and see if there were any more living Yuan soldiers.

The deputy general recognized him. “Hey! Aren’t you Sun Ting, from Ye?”

“That’s me,” Sun Ting replied. “I’ve come with the governor to take up my new post.”

“Hah,” the deputy said. “You barely got here and you already won a battle.”

The remaining Yuan soldiers were dragged to the side and laid together. Duan Ling, sweeping his eyes over them, suddenly froze. He pushed through the crowd, rushing toward them.

“Batu!” Duan Ling cried. He pounced on one body among the many, dragging the unconscious man aside. Heads turned as his shout alerted the surrounding soldiers.

Duan Ling looked down at a familiar face. Batu had grown up, his features harder and more angular. His face was covered in soot and filth, but for all that, Duan Ling recognized him in a heartbeat.

“Some water, quickly!” Duan Ling urged.

Though the men were surprised, they brought him a waterskin with all haste. Duan Ling poured some on Batu’s face and watched his eyes flutter open. Duan Ling breathed a sigh of relief. Yet in the next instant, Batu grabbed Duan Ling by the throat, sprang up, and put him in a headlock.

Shit! I’ve been tricked!

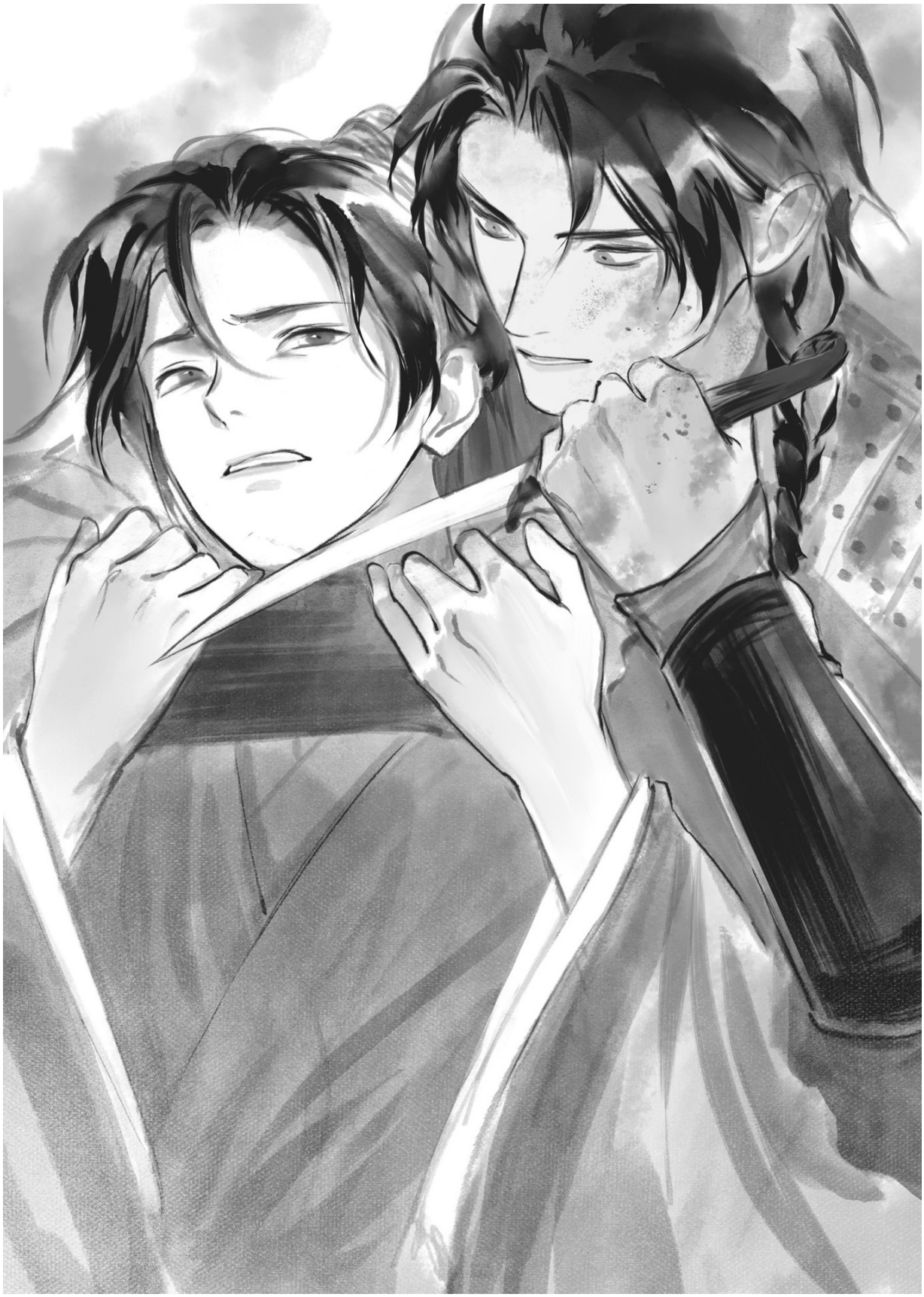
He tried to shake him off, but Batu was ready. They were familiar with each other’s tricks from childhood. Batu swept a leg out and sent him toppling over, dizzy. By the time Duan Ling steadied himself, Batu held him fast again, a dagger under his chin.

“The heavens are on my side,” Batu said in the Han language. To the soldiers, he said, “Bring me a horse.”

The soldiers looked at each other. Duan Ling shouted, “Shoot! He won’t dare kill me!”

“Bring a horse!” the deputy general shouted. “Don’t shoot!”

“You—!” Duan Ling sputtered.



“What makes you think I won’t kill you?” Batu hissed in Duan Ling’s ear.

His voice was different now, as if he’d become a different person. The arm strangling Duan Ling tightened—he’d become stronger too. Duan Ling couldn’t move at all, and the pressure tilted his head upward.

“If you kill your anda,” Duan Ling said, raising his brows, “Tengri will send you to hell.”

Batu remained silent, face unreadable. It was the same face as that night eight years ago—a familiar face. As the early morning sun shone down on them, still weak as it dispersed the night’s darkness, it was as if time wound itself back to the moment they’d first gazed at each other in the academy library.

A soldier led a horse over. Duan Ling had the brief thought that this deputy general was probably in cahoots with the lieutenant named Qin and hoped to dispose of him…but he had no time to consider it further. Batu struck him on the back of the head, and Duan Ling knew no more.

Batu dragged him onto the horse and spurred it toward the open plains.

“After them!” Sun Ting shouted.

The soldiers leapt onto their horses and raced after Batu.

Chapter 130

IT WAS THE HEIGHT of summer in the capital, and the heat was unbearable.

Chang Pin fanned himself as he entered Jiang Prefectural City, sweat soaking the robes on his back. Mu Kuangda stood in the corridor, drinking cold sour-plum soup; when he saw that his advisor had returned, he called, “Prepare a bowl for Mister Chang Pin.”

Chang Pin gulped it down where he stood.

Mu Kuangda waited until he finished to ask his first question: “How was the trip?”

“I almost died of heat stroke,” Chang Pin replied, seating himself in the shade.

“I sent someone with a message, but they must have missed you on the road.”

Chang Pin looked at him in surprise. “I didn’t see anyone.”

“Forget it,” Mu Kuangda said. “Since it was on the way, I thought it would be useful for you to stop in Ye. Wang Shan has just taken up his post there, and troubles are sure to come. I had intended for you to stay and help, then come back after the situation stabilized.”

Chang Pin nodded. Setting his bowl aside, he retrieved a petition from his robes. Mu Kuangda frowned, unfolding it.

“Eight years ago,” Chang Pin began, “on the day Wuluohou Mu arrived in Runan, Duan Xiaowan’s family manor caught fire in the night. Everything burned. None of the forty-seven inhabitants survived.”

“Oh? They all died?” Mu Kuangda asked.

Chang Pin nodded again. “Five years ago, the city suffered a famine, and then the war broke out. The Mongols plundered the city several times; year after year, the people of Runan either fled south or died. Children starved to death in the streets. I looked everywhere for a child of similar age, but only a few are left. Runan is a ghost town these days.”

“Quite a conundrum,” Mu Kuangda said, his frown deepening.

“But my luck didn’t fail me completely. I found an old man in Runan,” Chang Pin said. “He used to know the Duan family.”

“Where is he?”

“It’s the hottest time of the year, and the roads are rough. I didn’t dare bring him back with me. If he fell sick on the journey, our last clue would be gone.”

“Let’s talk upstairs,” Mu Kuangda said. He struck out for the library; Chang Pin followed him and closed the door.

Duan Ling had a long, long dream. He found himself back in the Duan family’s dark woodshed. Outside, a friend was shouting, *Duan Ling, Duan Ling, Duan Ling…*

“Hey, wake up!” Batu’s voice cut through his dream. “How are you still sleeping?”

Duan Ling’s head ached fit to split. He rolled over, the scent of soil in his nose. He was lying on green grass, with a blue lake beside him. Slowly, awareness returned to him.

His eyes flew open.

Batu already had a hand on him, sensing that Duan Ling was about to struggle. He pressed his weight down on Duan Ling. Batu’s arm was too thick, and his hold too strong; Duan Ling couldn’t break free.

“You—Batu! Let me go! What are you trying to do?!”

Batu was now tall and muscular. In the three years since they’d seen each other, he had grown up; he had broad shoulders and a trim waist, with the powerful musculature of a leopard. He gathered Duan Ling’s wrists in one hand, pressed a knee between Duan Ling’s legs, and leaned in to look him over carefully—so close his breath brushed across Duan Ling’s face.

Duan Ling thrashed and struggled, but Batu had him pinned. He felt Duan Ling up with his free hand, and within no time at all he’d stripped Duan Ling of his single layer of clothing and the Radiant White Tiger Armor.

“What are you doing?!” Duan Ling roared, caught off guard and now shirtless.

Batu patted his cheek lightly, threw his wadded-up clothing back at him, and shook out the chain mail. “Who gave you this?”

“Give that back! It’s mine!”

“Not anymore. You still owe me a token,” Batu replied.

He removed his own armor and untied his shirt, revealing his muscular arms and sculpted torso. He donned the Radiant White Tiger Armor and strolled over to the lake for a look at his reflection. He turned back to Duan Ling. “You’re mine now. I’m saving 2,400 taels of gold, so I’ll take that as a win.” He tossed a waterskin to Duan Ling. “Drink.”

Duan Ling had a few sips, wondering if Wu Du had noticed him missing yet. Maybe he was already bringing people to chase them down. He squinted into the distance and realized he had no idea where he was.

“Don’t even think about it,” Batu said, reading Duan Ling’s mind. “I left them in the dust a long time ago. Nobody’s coming to save you.”

“Let me go.”

Batu laughed. “You really think I would?”

Duan Ling was at a complete loss. He drank the rest of the water and threw the skin back at him. Batu would surely bend to refill it…and, as expected, Batu turned around and lowered his gaze to the lake. In a heartbeat, Duan Ling was on his feet. He sprinted toward a horse grazing nearby, jumped onto its back, and snapped the reins.

“Hup!”

The horse spun and sped into a gallop. Batu stood up and frowned.

Duan Ling was panting from adrenaline, but he couldn’t help glancing back at Batu. His heart was torn: Now that they’d met again, they were on opposite sides—hostile to each other—and they hadn’t even gotten to talk properly, yet he had been forced to escape like this.

Behind him, Batu dropped into a coiled crouch, then set off sprinting after them through the grass.

“Hup!” Duan Ling shouted again.

Without breaking his stride, Batu hurled something; a stone flew to strike the horse's rump. The horse startled and whinnied, throwing Duan Ling from its back. Batu rushed forward, grabbed Duan Ling around the waist, and rolled them both into the grass.

Batu laughed heartily. "You don't stand a chance against me!"

"Go to hell!" Duan Ling roared.

He climbed on top of Batu and threw a punch. Batu caught his fist before it could land, twisting Duan Ling's arm behind his back. He said, "Now let's see you try that again."

Duan Ling couldn't do a thing—neither fight nor escape. He was about to explode from anger.

"You know, I almost forgot how to speak Han," Batu said. "It's been too long. Get on the horse."

"Let me go!" Duan Ling shouted.

"Are you getting on or not?" Batu, now a full head taller than Duan Ling, continued, "Don't make me use more force than this. I'm in a good mood. I don't want to tie you up."

"Where are we going?"

"Carrying you off on horseback."

"Fuck off!" Duan Ling spat.

The phrase Batu had used, to the Mongols, typically meant abducting a girl, throwing her onto a horse, and galloping out onto the plains to use the sky as a blanket and the grass as a mat while you tangled together in intimacy. Some Mongols even referred to getting married as carrying off the bride on horseback.

Batu was obviously growing impatient. He shoved Duan Ling up onto the horse. Duan Ling didn't want to be tied up either, so he did as he was told. "I need to pee," he said, thinking he might be able to stall for a little while. Wu Du would almost certainly be looking for him by now.

"Don't try that on me," Batu said, then grabbed a rope and bound Duan Ling's hands. He mounted the horse and seated himself behind Duan

Ling, arms around his waist to keep him steady. He gathered up the reins and snapped them, shouting, “Hyah!”

The horse cantered away into the vast wilds. The sky overhead was blue, and the noon sun was bright; the mountains and plains spread endlessly before them. At this point, even if Duan Ling managed to escape, he would be completely lost, so he stopped trying.

“Don’t run,” Batu said, as if sensing his thoughts. “You won’t find your way back, and I don’t want you to die of hunger in the wilderness.”

“If it was that easy to starve to death, I would have died long ago. Why did you even capture me?!”

“I missed you,” Batu said with a casual air. “By the way, you killed almost all of my personal guards. Duan Ling, when did you get so ruthless?”

“Your people laid a siege on Shangjing that killed my dad. You murder us Han everywhere you go,” Duan Ling replied. “Killing a few of your soldiers is ruthless? I would rather kill all of them.”

“Do you hate me, then?” Batu asked.

“I don’t.”

“That’s good.”

Duan Ling went silent.

The horse slowed to a walk as they picked their way through a swamp. Sunlight scattered through the leaves, bathing them in mottled light and shadow.

“I’ve missed you for so many years,” Batu said. “I didn’t recognize you until you called my name.”

“I recognized you instantly,” Duan Ling said. “I knew it was you with one look. But now that you kidnapped me, I don’t recognize you at all. Batu, you’ve changed—you’re like a different person.”

“Oh,” was all Batu said as he peered around, wary of an ambush among the trees.

That singular move confirmed for Duan Ling that he stood no chance of escaping on this ride. Batu was careful; as they rode, he squinted his eyes

to examine his surroundings and tilted his head to listen. Sometimes he modulated their pace from quick to slow and back as they passed through swamps and woods.

“The trick you pulled yesterday was impressive,” Batu said. “It’s been a long time since anyone defeated me. What did you use? Poisonous smoke?”

Duan Ling had no plans to let anything slip. Instead of confirming Batu’s guess, he asked, “Where are you taking me?”

“Back to my camp, of course,” Batu said. “Where else would we go? When did you get so stupid?”

“Let me go—”

“No way! I’ve been searching for you for two years already. How could I let you go?!”

After they passed through the swamp and circled the base of a mountain, the view ahead opened up, and a Mongol camp appeared. Judging by its size, it held at least four thousand soldiers. Batu tugged on the rope around Duan Ling’s wrists to pull him off the horse, then walked him into the camp. When a soldier called out to him along the way, Batu shot him an irritated look.

The passing Yuan soldiers all glanced at Duan Ling, but none seemed to be surprised. Batu conducted Duan Ling to a tent at the center of the camp and bent to push him inside.

The tent was small, clearly the tent of a minghan jurtchi, a thousand-man commander. The son of Borjigin Kuchi was only commanding a thousand? Duan Ling’s hands were still bound as he sat down cross-legged on the carpet spread over the ground. Batu wrapped the end of the rope around a wooden stake and said, “Don’t run. Just wait for me to come back.”

He left, letting the tent flap fall shut behind him.

Even if he’d wanted to, Duan Ling had nowhere to go. Batu had taken his armor, and there were Yuan soldiers everywhere outside. If he tried to escape now, in broad daylight, he would die of an arrow through the throat —the Mongols wouldn’t care whose hostage he was.

Where was this place? The Yuan army had attacked Hejian the previous night. It had been dawn when Batu had taken him from the city, and they had arrived at the camp in just a few hours of riding. They were likely still within the borders of Great Chen.

“Borjigin!” A burly man stormed into the tent. Duan Ling immediately scooted backward. The stranger gave Duan Ling a curious look, threw the flap down, and stalked away.

A moment later, Batu returned with grilled meat and bread. He laid the meal down in front of Duan Ling and pushed over a kettle full of water, but didn’t untie his hands. The stranger burst in after him, furiously exclaiming, “Borjigin Batu!”

Batu straightened up. The tent’s ceiling was so low their heads nearly touched the top as they stood facing one another. Duan Ling turned away and avoided looking at the burly stranger so he wouldn’t realize Duan Ling understood Mongolian.

“Where did you go?!” the man said. He had a round face with fleshy cheeks. “Shilu is blaming you—we didn’t even take Hejian, but we lost how many men?!”

“Tell him to come and find me. My sword hasn’t tasted blood yet today,” Batu said.

“Think this through,” the man snarled. “How will I explain to the khan when we get back?”

“They were my own personal guards,” Batu said. “Warriors that follow me. It’s my business if they die, not yours.”

“And what’s this? A Han?” The man pointed at Duan Ling.

“My prisoner,” Batu said. “I captured him; he’s my slave.”

“Prisoners must be handed over,” the man said. “Shilu will make arrangements for him. You’ll be punished for hiding your spoils! You sacrificed so many warriors just to capture one man, and there aren’t even any women. You should bring him out for others to feast on.”

“Fuck off,” Batu said with no expression on his face. “Try saying that again.”

“Borjigin!” The burly man, increasingly furious, pulled out the blade at his waist. “You’re too fucking arrogant! I’ll kill you!”

The moment Duan Ling saw the man’s shoulder twitch, he cried, “Watch out!”

Batu hadn’t thought the stranger was serious. Too late, he reeled back as the man slashed toward his waist. That strike on its own would’ve been enough to open his stomach and spill his guts—but the blade struck the Radiant White Tiger Armor. It screeched as it slid off the mail, which was left entirely unharmed.

Batu recovered in an instant. He drew his dagger and spun, stabbing toward the man’s neck. Before Duan Ling could rush forward to help, Batu’s knife had found its target. Blood gurgled from the man’s mouth and nose as he tried to breathe through the gash in his throat. He glared at Batu, lips trembling, and fell down dead.

Duan Ling was left speechless.

Batu patted his armored waist and looked at Duan Ling in disbelief. “What kind of treasure is this?”

“You…” Duan Ling said. “Who was that, one of your men? And you killed him, just like that?!”

“I don’t know him well,” Batu said with a confused look. “I never paid attention to what he looked like.”

“What was his name?”

“I forget.”

The look on Duan Ling’s face proclaimed that Batu was a hopeless case.

“I’ll have someone come clean this up,” Batu said.

He swept out of the tent again. For the first time in his life, Duan Ling had truly witnessed the barbarity of the Mongol people—these men acted like beasts!

This time, Batu was gone for a long while. After he waited for what felt like forever, another stranger came into the tent and looked down at Duan Ling. “Come with me. The army inspector wants to see you.”

Chapter 131

DUAN LING WAS LED out of Batu's tent and into what seemed to be the commander's tent. Batu stood to one side. A man who must be the army inspector occupied the middle; the other soldiers in the tent, four minghan jurtchi, were arguing vigorously. Batu frowned, plainly annoyed by the situation.

"I gave you a thousand men," the army inspector said. "And what did you bring back? A single Han! You went to fight a battle, Borjigin!"

"One Han, but he's *my* slave," Batu responded. "What was that guy's name, anyway?"

"Khupurnu!" one of the jurtchi shouted at Batu. "He was my warrior!"

"Well, he tried to take my prisoner," Batu said. "He wanted to give him to the men as a reward. He attacked me, so I defended myself."

"Borjigin," the army inspector snapped. "Enough excuses. When are you going to capture Ye?"

Batu swallowed his anger and said, "Give me another ten days. I almost had Hejian."

A hook-nosed jurtchi spoke up. "Why don't you run home and drink your milk, hm? Tolui needs a new stableboy for his horses. Borjigin, can you even fight? Why can't we have a quick battle and be done with it?"

"Unless you want to fight both the Khitan and Han at once, you'll need to be patient."

"The Liao army can't get here that fast," the jurtchi said.

"The prisoner can understand everything we're saying," Batu said coldly. "You can bear the consequences for speaking in front of him."

Duan Ling was already analyzing the military strength of the Mongols. Including Batu, there were a total of five minghan jurtchi present, which meant only five thousand men had breached the border of Southern Chen. Were these all their forces? And what had the hook-nosed man meant

about the Liao army? Now his racing thoughts screeched to a halt—he hadn't thought Batu would reveal that he spoke Mongolian. Everyone turned to look at him. The army inspector drew his knife and threw it to the ground.

"Kill him," he said. "That's an order."

"No," Batu protested. "He's still useful."

"What is this prisoner's identity?"

"He has important information about the Han. I can still make use of him. He can't be killed." Batu picked up the knife, twirled it, and stabbed it into the table in front of the army inspector. "If I can't take Ye within ten days, you can have him. I'll be in my tent."

Batu turned around and, as everyone watched, took up the slack in the rope tied around Duan Ling's hands and wrapped it a few times around Duan Ling's neck. Setting a hand on his shoulder, he shoved Duan Ling out of the commander's tent and dragged him back through camp, marching him forward with an arm around his shoulders, just as he used to at Ming Academy.

"I've got to go see how many of my men you killed," Batu said. "I'll come stay with you tonight. Eat some dinner."

"You're a busy man," Duan Ling said, dripping sarcasm.

"What would you have me do?" Batu said. "You're as fierce as a wild horse. Here—you should wear this armor instead. It's good stuff, invulnerable to swords and spears."

Batu removed the Radiant White Tiger Armor and untied Duan Ling's bindings. The second his hands were free, Duan Ling yanked Batu down by the neck, hoping to make him stumble. Batu anticipated his attempt. Unfazed, he held the armor aloft with his left hand and stuck Duan Ling's head through the neck hole with his right.

Duan Ling was so mad he couldn't speak.

Pure strength could, indeed, defeat skill. Most of Duan Ling's wrestling moves had been taught to him by Batu himself, and he had no weapon, so his swordsmanship was useless. He was no match for Batu.

Batu re-bound his hands behind his back. "I'm leaving," he said.

He wasn’t taking Duan Ling’s resistance seriously at all. He put a hand on Duan Ling’s shoulder and pushed him down to sit, wound the rope to the tent’s central pole, and turned to go.

The only thoughts in Duan Ling’s head were curses. Batu was making a joke of him!

As Batu stepped out, Duan Ling noticed a tattered scrap of cloth tied around his bare arm.

What was it?

He was finally alone in the tent, but now wasn’t a good time to make his escape. Instead, he would take this as a golden opportunity—he was in the perfect position to spy on the Yuan army. There were five thousand men in the camp, of which Batu was only one. Unlike the Han, the Mongols didn’t always recognize their sons; Kublai Khan’s four sons had to win their own achievements if they hoped to gain support from the soldiers. Ögedei had inherited the khanate, and his brothers had gone off to fight on their own. The same held true for his grandsons. Batu had to achieve military feats on his own, or he would never win the support of the people. Perhaps this was why he had joined this campaign as a minghan jurtchi. Still, he must have a certain level of skill to be able to lead a thousand soldiers.

Duan Ling leaned down to take a bite of the bread. It was past noon. He wondered if Wu Du and the others had figured out where he was yet. After filling his stomach, he grew drowsy and drifted off to sleep.

Some time later, he woke muzzily to Batu untying the rope on his hands and covering him with a blanket. He slipped under it to sleep side by side with Duan Ling.

Duan Ling waited a long time. Nearly an hour later, Batu began to snore lightly. Duan Ling opened his eyes a crack, but just as he was about to move, he heard Batu’s voice in his ear. “Don’t even think about running.”

He rolled on top of Duan Ling and pressed his whole body weight down onto him, attempting to tickle him as he had when they were children.

“Don’t touch me!” Duan Ling cried. Batu froze, and Duan Ling continued, “If you put a hand down my clothes, you’ll die a miserable death.”

The last thing he wanted was for Batu to be poisoned. Wu Du might be miles away; if Batu was bitten by the golden crow now, there would be no ready antidote. And with Batu dead, no one would protect Duan Ling from the rest of the soldiers.

“Oh, is there poison? I did want to ask you what method you used to poison so many of my warriors.”

Duan Ling cocked his head and cast him a sidelong glance.

Batu sat up and yawned, obviously still sleep-deprived. He couldn’t seem to get comfortable, first scratching at his neck then unbuttoning his clothing. Shirtless, he retrieved a towel from the nearby copper basin and wiped his upper body clean, his powerful muscles flexing. As he worked, his eyes never left Duan Ling. He had always been like this—staring at others without restraint, like a tiger eyeing its prey.

“What’s that on your arm?” Duan Ling asked.

Batu untied the strip of cloth and handed it to him. The cloth was dirty and stank of sweat, obviously something Batu kept on him always. Recognition slammed into Duan Ling. This scrap was the same tattered hem he’d torn off his own sleeve and written a message on—the one he’d tied to an arrow and shot into the boat of the Yuan envoy Amugu.

The charcoal-stick writing was smeared and blurred. Batu tied the cloth back around his arm.

“Is that…the letter I wrote you?” Duan Ling asked.

“Yeah,” Batu confirmed, distracted.

“We haven’t seen each other in forever. Is there nothing else you want to say to me?”

“What is there to say about the past?” Once he finished wiping himself down, he threw the towel aside, retrieved wine and meat from the shelf, and said, “I met you again, didn’t I? So there’s nothing to say about what happened before. You’re by my side now, always here, forever. I don’t need to know about the past.”

Sometimes, Duan Ling couldn’t understand the workings of Batu’s mind. It had been like this back then, too—but after they hadn’t seen each other for many years, Batu’s thinking was even harder for him to grasp.

“Wine?” Batu held it out to him.

“No,” Duan Ling said coldly.

“What, you still haven’t learned to drink?”

Duan Ling felt suffocated. This reunion wasn’t going how he’d imagined it at all—there was no reminiscing, and every interaction was simultaneously natural yet unpredictable.

Batu unsheathed his dagger and wiped away the blood left from the man he’d killed, then cut off a large piece of mutton and began eating. The sky grew dark outside. Eventually, he lit the tent’s lamp.

“Don’t you care about my past at all?” Duan Ling asked at last.

“No,” Batu said. “I care about your future.”

Duan Ling burst into laughter. Batu took another sip of wine and started laughing too.

“Drink some with me. Come on,” Batu said.

He leaned over with the wineskin and offered Duan Ling a few sips. The wine was strong, and Duan Ling coughed ferociously once he swallowed. The alcohol was like a burning knife slicing down his throat. His face flushed.

Batu glanced at Duan Ling, his look inscrutable. He raised a hand and tucked Duan Ling’s hair behind his ear, studying him carefully. It was like being stared at by a wolf, but it wasn’t long before Batu looked away again, as if hesitating over something.

“After you left that day, what happened?” Duan Ling asked.

If Batu wasn’t going to start the conversation, he would; Batu had been acting unnaturally since their reunion, almost as if he were putting on a performance.

“Do you really want to know?”

“Tell me,” Duan Ling said. “And stop with the act. You can’t fool me.”

Batu gave Duan Ling a focused stare, seemingly a little drunk, and said, “Then you tell me, what am I thinking about right now?”

“You’re thinking about how to use me to capture Hejian, Ye, and Chang—or how to use me as a hostage to negotiate with Chen.”

“Wrong,” Batu said. “I’ll give you two more guesses.”

Duan Ling frowned and changed directions. “You’re wondering why I would let that Cai dog steal my position as crown prince.”

“Wrong again,” Batu said with a smile. “That’s obvious, isn’t it? Lang Junxia couldn’t save you, so he got the Cai dog to impersonate you, setting him up to be the emperor in the future.”

“Why would he do that?” Duan Ling asked. Batu seemed to know something he didn’t.

“How should I know?” Batu parried. “You’re still wrong. One more chance.”

Duan Ling thought for another moment, then said, “You’re thinking about letting me go.”

“Wrong.”

“Then what?”

Batu crawled over to him and crouched on one knee. Duan Ling sat cross-legged, looking up at him; Batu gazed down into his eyes. He put a finger under Duan Ling’s chin, tilting his face up, and said, “It’s better if you don’t know.”

Duan Ling didn’t know what to say. Batu’s clear-cut features were complemented by those same indigo eyes, but right now he had a rough look to him. He seemed to be getting impatient with Duan Ling.

This guy’s always known how to hold a grudge, Duan Ling thought. *Did I offend him somehow? Why does he look so dissatisfied?*

“Now this is the look I remember—like someone owes you money,” Duan Ling said. “What were you thinking of?”

Batu took a deep breath. After a moment he said, “I’m thinking…if I fucked you now, would you scream and cry and hate me for the rest of your life, like a little wife?”

Now Duan Ling was truly speechless.

The Mongols were known to treat their prisoners this way; in their uncivilized customs, young men were spoils of war. They seemed to regard such behavior as another form of conquest. When fleeing from Shangjing, Duan Ling had only narrowly avoided such a fate when he was caught by Yuan soldiers in the Xianbei Mountains and dragged into an abandoned house.

“So you can brag to your father and those other jurtchi that you fucked the crown prince of Southern Chen?” Duan Ling said in a mocking tone.

“No,” Batu said. “Not the crown prince. You.”

That knocked the words right out of Duan Ling’s mouth. He raised his leg and pressed his knee to Batu’s chest. “Stay away from me, Batu. If you really did that, you’d regret it. I haven’t heard of anyone who’d rape his own anda. Tengri would definitely send you to hell.”

It was Batu’s turn to be speechless. He had brought this on himself. When it came to a physical fight, Duan Ling couldn’t beat him—but when it came to a battle of words, he was no match for Duan Ling.

He stared at Duan Ling a moment longer, then sat back down, as if he’d changed his mind. He vented a long sigh. “After your dad sent me away,” he said, “I returned to my people. I sent you six letters, but none of them ever reached you.”

“Why did you send me letters?” Duan Ling asked.

“They were planning to attack Shangjing,” Batu said. “I wanted to tell you to run.”

“Well, it’s too late now,” Duan Ling said. “What’s the point of telling me this?”

“Nothing much. Except, do you know what they did to me when those letters fell into our scouts’ hands? My father broke four of my ribs in front of Ögedei and nearly cut off my hand. Because I tried to save you, I was bedridden for half a year, and my right hand is still weak. The day Shangjing was sacked, I deserted my father’s army, galloped thousands of miles, ran two horses into the ground, and almost died at the hands of the Han people—to save you.”

Duan Ling stared at Batu, dazed. “Oh” was all he could say.

“Hah,” Batu replied. “Duan Ling, you’re too heartless.”

Chapter 132

DUAN LING WAS QUIET for a breath. “When I heard that you, Zongzhen, and Helian were all searching for me,” he admitted, “there was a moment when I thought I should drop everything and leave with Helian—go to you all instead.”

Batu had expected Duan Ling to deflect as he’d always done, to avoid revealing too much of his feelings. Suddenly, he realized Duan Ling was the one who’d changed. When they’d first reunited, strangely enough, Duan Ling had thought Batu too different, when the truth was the exact opposite—while to Batu, Duan Ling had appeared the same as ever, when deep down, he had transformed into someone entirely new.

“‘You all’? Who exactly?” Batu asked.

“Yeah, that’s the problem,” Duan Ling said with a laugh. “You’re in Yuan, Zongzhen is in Liao, and Helian is in Western Liang. You guys aren’t together. Who would I go to?”

Batu gazed quietly at Duan Ling.

“But I couldn’t have gone to anyone,” Duan Ling continued. “My dad told me everyone is born with their own destiny, and this is mine. I’ve let you down—let all of you down. You treated me with genuine sincerity, but the only thing I cared for all this time was my own survival. I had no choice. I’ll probably continue to wrong you all in the future. I’m so…very sorry.”

Duan Ling’s response was completely outside Batu’s expectations. “You’ve changed,” he said. “You could’ve said anything—something to let me know I haven’t looked for you in vain all these years. Even if it was a lie, like saying you’d follow me wherever I go. Can’t you just say something to make me happy, even for a little while?”

“But I don’t want to lie to you. I’m telling you the truth because I have nothing else to offer,” Duan Ling said. “I have nothing to repay you with, not even myself. I’m my father’s son, the crown prince of Southern Chen. What do you think I can give you?”

As soon as he said it, he thought of Mu Qing as well. Duan Ling sighed. Of course he wanted to repay those who'd shown him kindness, but he had nothing in his possession worth giving—not even to Wu Du.

Batu seemed to suddenly understand the grief Duan Ling hadn't voiced aloud. "You're just as Zongzhen said—changed. All of you have changed. I'm the only fool who keeps on deluding himself, still hoping to fight to determine a winner," he said.

"You haven't changed," Duan Ling agreed. "Still the same as ever… But let's not talk about that anymore. How are your parents, Batu? Are they well?"

"Do you remember when you came to find me to smuggle me out of Shangjing, you asked about my mom?" Batu asked.

"Didn't you say she went ahead?" Duan Ling asked.

"She died," Batu said. "I was with her inside the house at the time."

Duan Ling's face went solemn. He nodded.

Studying his expression, Batu continued, "After my mom passed away, you're the only person left I consider family. Back then, I wanted you to come with me—but now that I think back on it, I was too naive."

Batu laughed and shook his head at how foolish his younger self had been.

"Let me go," Duan Ling said. "We'll fight this out fair and square. Keeping me captive here won't do you any good."

"You wish—I'm not fighting you," Batu retorted.

"Then what is it that you want?" Duan Ling asked, frowning.

"I want to talk to you, like we are now," Batu said. "Take you with me wherever I go, so we can talk whenever we want."

"You only have ten days," Duan Ling pointed out.

He'd first assumed Batu's demand for ten days to take Ye was so he could force Duan Ling into devising some scheme to attack his own territory—an insidious strategy. It would trap Duan Ling in a dilemma: If he didn't cooperate, after ten days passed, Batu would be held accountable and the army inspector would kill him.

But to Duan Ling's surprise, Batu hadn't considered that at all.

"If we can't take the city, we'll just leave. I have troops in Hulunbuir, up north. Ögedei is the one who stripped me of my command and transferred me here with a thousand men and a bunch of rags. Help him besiege the city? Like hell."

Duan Ling put a hand to his brow, speechless.

"I only said that to buy some time," Batu continued. "Once the Khitan in the north are defeated, and your men come to find you, I'll use the chaos to steal you away to Hulunbuir."

"I'm not a thing you own!" Duan Ling protested, furious.

"You're a man who belongs to me," Batu replied easily. "Not a thing. Now go to sleep. Aren't you tired? It's been a busy day."

As summer yielded to autumn, nights in the mountains had grown chillier. Batu tossed Duan Ling a military-issue blanket, motioning for him to tuck himself in. But how was Duan Ling supposed to sleep? Batu was intending to carry him off north beyond the Great Wall, into the Mongols' territory, where Batu was most familiar with the land. Wu Du would have an even harder time finding him then.

He had to find a way to escape. Now was the perfect time—night had fallen, and moving about in the dark was much easier than during the day, when his goal would be too immediately obvious.

Batu lay silently next to him.

"Hey." Duan Ling prodded him. "Are you asleep already?"

"We can talk later. We've got plenty of time," Batu replied irritably.

Batu had no idea of Wu Du's true strength. Duan Ling sighed in relief. Amugu's report apparently hadn't been very detailed—perhaps because it pained him to admit his defeat.

"Where's the dagger I gave you?" Batu asked.

"Lang Junxia took it," Duan Ling said. "It's probably with that damned Cai dog."

Batu hummed. "Then forget it. I'll make you a new one later."

Exasperated, Duan Ling said, “Don’t you want to demand territory or something? Why not name your conditions—like, if you help me eliminate Cai Yan, I’ll cede you land once I return to court? Either way, I’m telling you now, Batu: It’s pointless, even if you send me to your father or Ögedei. I won’t yield an inch of Southern Chen to you.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Duan Ling,” Batu replied. “Who wants to eliminate Cai Yan for you? I should be thanking him. If he hadn’t taken your place, how could I have captured you outside Hejian today?”

Duan Ling blinked in shock. “Then why are you taking me to Hulunbuir?”

“To live our lives!” Batu exclaimed, frustrated. “Can’t you go to sleep? You’re so annoying!”

“I can’t sleep tied up like this,” Duan Ling complained.

“If I untie you, you’ll stab me in my sleep. And Amugu said you’re carrying a centipede.”

No wonder you were so efficient stripping off my armor, Duan Ling thought. But that made him remember exactly how close Batu had gotten to being bitten by the golden crow. “But you still touched me anyway. Aren’t you scared to die?”

“If I die, I die. Who cares.”

The exchange was as meaningless as countless others they’d shared during their time at Ming Academy, unchanged after all these years. Duan Ling waited another beat before asking, “What else did Amugu say?”

Losing his patience, Batu twisted around and stuffed a cloth in Duan Ling’s mouth.

Duan Ling was momentarily stunned. He protested around the gag: “*Mmf!*”

Batu pulled the cloth out. “Still wanna talk?”

Duan Ling pressed his lips shut. Batu nudged Duan Ling toward the center of the tent, rolled him onto his side, then wrapped his arms around him from behind and threw a leg over him—just like when they’d occasionally shared a bed at the academy.

Duan Ling was miserable; his hands were still bound, and he didn't dare speak again. Behind him, Batu's breathing had evened, as though he'd fallen into a deep slumber. He was as warm as a furnace, locking Duan Ling in place with his powerful body. Duan Ling was soon drenched in sweat where he lay under the sweltering blankets. Not until after midnight did he succumb to his fatigue and drift off.

He didn't stay asleep for long.

A cacophony of angry shouts erupted in the distance, followed by Yuan alarm bells jolting the entire army awake.

"The Han are attacking!" someone hollered.

Before Duan Ling could so much as sit up, Batu kicked him into the corner of the tent, drew his saber, and charged out of the flap without even pulling on his boots. With a deep rumble, a portion of the tents went up in flames.

Wu Du is here! How is he so fast? Thank heavens! Duan Ling thought. Ye and Hejian combined had fewer than four thousand soldiers, but the chaos outside sounded like an army of ten thousand.

Duan Ling shouted, "Wu Du! I'm here!"

Batu stormed back in barefooted and stuffed the gag back into Duan Ling's mouth.

Boom!

The tent collapsed around them as a massive, flaming beast crashed through, cracking the poles and setting the canopy on fire. The fabric fluttered down to drape over the rampaging, burning creature.

An ox. Duan Ling immediately grasped the situation. Almost a hundred oxen with torches tied to their tails had been driven into the Yuan camp under the cover of night, their bodies clad in armor. No matter how the Yuan soldiers slashed at the beasts with their blades, they were powerless against the bulls' rampage.

Batu grabbed Duan Ling and rolled aside, taking the brunt of the thrashing bull's kick. He collapsed face down, gasping for breath. Duan Ling scrabbled for a scimitar on the ground and swiftly sawed through the

ropes binding his hands. The second he was free, he hauled Batu out of the path of another bull.

He yanked out the gag and yelled, “Wu Du! Over here!”

Batu tried to tackle him to the floor, but Duan Ling brought up a freed hand, blocking the attack as his father had taught him. Batu changed tactics, whirling to lock his legs around Duan Ling’s waist, then flipping Duan Ling over with a wrestling throw. He scooped Duan Ling up under one arm and clamped his other hand over his mouth as he hauled Duan Ling toward the stables.

Duan Ling sank his teeth into Batu’s hand; Batu howled in pain. He was about to chop the back of Duan Ling’s neck to knock him unconscious when the gleam of a blade flashed behind him.

“Don’t kill him!” Duan Ling yelled, swinging up his borrowed scimitar to parry Flashblade with a bright *clang*.

The scimitar split neatly in two. Wu Du, his expression still battle-stoic, rushed to Duan Ling. He dropped a fleeting kiss on Duan Ling’s lips before sweeping him up in his arms and pulling him backward.

Batu yanked a spear from the weapons rack, spun it in his hands, and thrust it out with all the strength in those muscular shoulders. The tip of the spear streaked toward Wu Du—but Wu Du was faster still. He caught the haft under his arm and lunged toward Batu, as though Batu had delivered himself straight into his grasp.

Batu abandoned the spear and met Wu Du with bare fists. Wu Du threw out a palm strike, which Batu matched. The soundless clash of their hands meeting hurled Batu backward. He reeled, nearly spitting blood.

Wu Du didn’t hesitate; he whistled, and Skychaser galloped over. “Let’s go!” he said, swinging Duan Ling up onto the horse.

Skychaser wheeled and charged out of the sea of fire.

“How’d you know where I wa—”

Duan Ling’s question was cut off by Wu Du’s urgent cry: “Duck!”

Wu Du bent low, pressing Duan Ling firmly against the horse’s back as he swung Flashblade to cut down anyone in their path. Blood sprayed as they broke through the fray.

Skychaser whinnied and reared as more soldiers streamed into their path. Wu Du barked, “Take the reins! Go right!”

Clinging to Skychaser’s neck, Duan Ling took up the reins and tugged the horse’s head. Skychaser charged toward the rear of the Yuan army. The soldiers were scrambling to shoot at a second wave of fire oxen when Wu Du charged them from behind, catching them unawares.

Flashblade sang through the air, clearing a gory path. Arrows screamed past them as Skychaser charged into the thick of the enemy forces only to come face-to-face with another cluster of flaming bulls, thundering toward them. Duan Ling screamed as they neared collision. Wu Du sheathed his sword and shielded Duan Ling’s head with both arms as Skychaser barreled his way through the fiery stampede.

Chapter 133

DUAN LING HAD NEVER witnessed a more chaotic battlefield in his life. Fire oxen rushed wildly in every direction. Wu Du knocked down a Yuan soldier charging them from the side, and Duan Ling took the chance to swipe his bow and quiver. More than once Skychaser collided with their enemies, nearly throwing them to the ground. In the end, the warhorse managed to escape into the open darkness only through pure instinct.

But danger lurked everywhere on the plains.

Duan Ling, panting for breath, murmured, “Wu Du.”

Wu Du slumped exhausted over Duan Ling’s back. He struggled to push himself upright but succeeded for only a moment before his strength gave out, and he sank heavily onto Duan Ling again. The pair swayed astride Skychaser as the horse galloped into the distance, heedless of the direction.

“Are you all right?” Wu Du asked at last.

The night around them was pitch-black. Wu Du forced himself to sit up again, and Duan Ling turned to capture his warm lips with his own. Lightning flashed across the sky, illuminating the stormy cloud cover overhead. Wu Du said no more, holding Duan Ling tight as they charged ahead.

“Were you struck by an arrow?” Duan Ling asked.

“Mm,” Wu Du replied.

“Where?”

“Shoulder. I’ll be fine.”

“We need to stop and remove it,” Duan Ling said.

“Enemy scouts are everywhere for the next ten li,” Wu Du said grimly. “Let’s get out of here first.”

Duan Ling reached backward to check. Though Wu Du was wearing armor, blood had seeped through it all down his back. Skychaser continued

racing across the plains as Duan Ling's breathing grew panicked. "No—we're stopping now."

"It's too dangerous!" Wu Du hissed.

By the time Skychaser plunged into a dense forest, nearly an hour later, Wu Du could barely keep his seat on the horse. When he slid out of the saddle, his knees buckled. Duan Ling frantically stripped his armor to find an arrow still embedded in his shoulder. Mongol arrows were barbed and grooved for the purpose of bloodletting. Duan Ling unstrapped the dagger secured to Skychaser's saddle, started a fire, and sterilized the blade in the flames.

"I'm pulling it out," warned Duan Ling.

He snipped through the arrow shaft, then pushed the searing blade into the meat of Wu Du's shoulder. Wu Du fell slack against him, one arm clinging tight to his waist as Duan Ling worked the dagger to dig the arrowhead free. With one last firm twist, the arrowhead came loose. Blood streamed from the wound. Wu Du's embrace was so crushing it was as if he wanted to fuse Duan Ling into his very bones.

Duan Ling hugged him back just as firmly. Working in the dim firelight, he applied a hemostatic powder from Wu Du's pouch and pressed a cloth to the wound. Wu Du's remedy worked wonders, quickly staunching the bleeding.

"Does it hurt?" Duan Ling asked.

"Don't speak," Wu Du murmured, gazing into Duan Ling's eyes. "Won't you repay your laoye for his efforts?"

Their breaths mingled as Duan Ling surged forward and claimed Wu Du's lips. It was a frenzied kiss, containing all of Duan Ling's hunger. Wu Du responded in kind, devouring Duan Ling's mouth like a ravenous beast. They clung together, tumbling to the ground with their arms wrapped around one another, kissing with a reckless abandon that stole the breath from each other's lungs.

Another bolt of lightning streaked across the sky. Thunder rumbled, and a few drops of rain spattered the ground.

“It’s still dangerous here,” Wu Du said as they broke apart, panting. “We need to keep moving.”

Duan Ling knew Wu Du’s nerves must’ve been a string pulled taut during the day he’d been missing. Now that he’d found him, all that frantic energy had dissipated. Duan Ling pressed his ear to the ground and detected the hoofbeats of their pursuers in the distance.

“I’ll handle it,” he said. “You catch some shut-eye on the horse.”

“Mn,” Wu Du agreed.

Raindrops pattered down through the blustery winds, and what had been a drizzle quickly crescendoed into a roaring downpour. Duan Ling sat at the front of the saddle while Wu Du, pale-faced, leaned on his back, arms circled weakly around his waist. Pained, Duan Ling cupped his cheek and pressed a kiss to his pallid lips before removing the Radiant White Tiger Armor and ordering Wu Du to put it on.

The storm drowned out all sound as they rode onward. Suddenly, the hair prickled on the back of Duan Ling’s neck. He unshouldered his bow and peered tensely around the dark woods, arrow nocked. At the sound of rustling, he let fly.

The shriek of a falcon pierced the air—a scout bird of the Yuan army.

“*Hyah!*” Duan Ling snapped the reins, and Skychaser charged out of the forest amid the drumming of thunder and torrential rain. The moment they emerged, shouts went up from Yuan soldiers. A troop of more than a hundred men were waiting for them. Skychaser galloped ahead and wheeled around just as a hail of arrows rained down on Duan Ling and Wu Du.

They hadn’t shaken the Mongols at all—the soldiers had been right on their tail the entire time, following the falcon.

The rain sheeted down around them. The trees were over-logged on this part of Mount Song, leaving barren slopes prone to landslides in heavy storms. But Skychaser forged ahead without complaint, just like Wu Du—carrying them at a frenzied pace down the mountain.

Eastward lay Liao territory. Duan Ling rode Skychaser hard into the valley without knowing which direction they were headed in, the Yuan troops hot on their heels.

An arrow whistled past, grazing his arm. “Skychaser!” Duan Ling shouted. “We’re counting on you now!”

Duan Ling let the reins go slack, giving Skychaser his head. The mountain paths had turned to rivers in the storm, and Skychaser splashed through them like an eagle skimming the sea, raising waves as he raced toward the horizon.

Arrows rained down on them from behind. Ahead, another Yuan troop appeared, hemming them in.

“Shit!” Duan Ling cried. “Wu Du, we’re surrounded!”

Wu Du was slumped lifelessly over Duan Ling’s back. He’d lost consciousness from blood loss, his breathing faint and shallow.

“Wu Du!” Duan Ling cried. “Wake up!”

Skychaser pivoted, darting through the narrowing gap between the converging forces. The Yuan soldiers leveled their spears, closing in on them.

“*Wu Du!*” Duan Ling screamed.

Another bolt of lightning tore across the sky, the blinding glare illuminating the dark forest.

Wu Du snapped awake.

“Hang on tight!” he barked. His pupils contracted in the flashing light. He yanked on the reins, wheeling Skychaser toward the cliffs at the end of the path.

“Hyah!”

Skychaser shot forward and launched them straight off the precipice.

“Wu Du!” Duan Ling cried as he braced for their plunge into the abyss below.

But to his shock, Skychaser’s hooves landed on wood slats.

In the space of that single flash of lightning, Wu Du had seen their perilous surroundings clearly—including the dilapidated suspension bridge that hung over a chasm hundreds of feet deep.

Skychaser thundered across the bridge. The moment they were safe on solid ground, Wu Du slashed at the ropes on either side—Flashblade in his left hand and a dagger in his right—and the suspension bridge crashed down, sending their pursuers that had followed them onto the bridge tumbling down into the void with it.

Duan Ling panted as Wu Du reined Skychaser to a stop. They looked back. The rest of the Yuan soldiers had halted at the cliff's edge, arrows nocked. Wu Du spurred Skychaser on without hesitation, fleeing into the night.

At last they reached the base of the mountain. They galloped another forty li through unrelenting rain that turned the meadows into a swamp. Dawn had broken, though the sky remained dark; on the horizon, shrouded in gloomy clouds, a city's silhouette came into view.

"We're here," Wu Du said. "That's Ye."

Nerves frayed to nothing after running for an entire night, Duan Ling could barely speak. Wu Du, however, seemed to have regained himself. The iron of his armor clanked against the saddle as they journeyed on. Otherwise, he wore only a thin pair of pants and the Radiant White Tiger Armor, which barely fit on his large frame. Faces smeared with dirt, they approached the Ye city gates.

"It's Skychaser!"

"Skychaser!"

"The commandant is back!"

Before Duan Ling could announce himself, he heard cries from atop the walls, followed by the rumble of the gates opening.

"They recognize Skychaser?" Duan Ling asked, incredulous.

"You'll see when we get inside," Wu Du said, and even though he was still exhausted, his voice was laden with relief. He ruffled Duan Ling's hair.

Ye's city garrison soldiers poured out of the open gates, lining both sides of the road as Wu Du escorted Duan Ling down the main street toward the governor's residence.

The city itself was in a state of disrepair. The few roads it had were muddy and pockmarked with puddles; the walls were crumbling, and while some of the citizens' houses along the main road had roofs of clay tiles, others were only covered in thatch. More garrison soldiers appeared as the pair rode on, surrounding them.

"Commandant!" someone shouted.

Wu Du raised a hand and dismounted outside the governor's residence. He commanded, "Man the defenses and double the patrols. We should expect the Mongols to attack any moment!"

"Lord Governor!"

As soon as Duan Ling and Wu Du stepped into the government office, Lin Yunqi came bustling over. Duan Ling was soaked to the skin. He waved the man off and collapsed onto a divan at the center of the main hall.

"Lord Governor—that's our new governor? He's so young! Oho, and pretty, too."

"My lord, the people are asking for their oxen. What should we do?"

"This is the governor? Can we finally get paid this year's salary then? The brothers have got to eat!"

"Urgent news from Hejian. The autumn crops…"

"My lord, we discovered last night that the Yuan army has pitched their camp on Mount Song—"

"Bandits are wreaking havoc near the river around Mount Hengshan—"

"We still don't even know whether the previous governor is alive or dead! What does the imperial court mean by sending a replacement?!"

People flooded into the main hall, all talking over one another. Duan Ling didn't recognize a single face and nodded blankly at everyone, utterly stumped for what to say. Fortunately, Lin Yunqi stepped forward to intervene.

"The governor needs rest; we'll address these matters tomorrow. Everything owed will be paid. Our governor is the nation's tanhua, and he has the support of the court. No one will starve or freeze. Now please—"

“One more word and it’s a flogging!” Wu Du roared.

The hall fell silent.

Lin Yunqi ushered the crowd out, and their hushed voices faded into the distance.

Laoye… My lord, my savior, Duan Ling thought as he tuned out the rest and slumped against Wu Du.

He was asleep within moments.

When Duan Ling woke later, he was ravenous. Wu Du, a bandage wrapped around his wounded shoulder and wearing only his underpants, sat cross-legged by the bed before a small stove, cooking congee that smelled delicious.

He glanced over when he heard Duan Ling’s stomach growling. “Awake?”

Duan Ling had no idea when he’d been carried into this room. The sky outside was still dark with rain, making it hard to tell the time.

“I only just woke up myself,” Wu Du said. Anticipating Duan Ling’s next question, he supplied, “It’s nearly dawn. You slept for a full day.”

He sat on the bed and turned so Duan Ling could check the dressing on his shoulder. “A little closer,” Duan Ling said, beckoning him over.

Wu Du obliged, and Duan Ling wound his arms around his waist from behind and bent forward to nibble on his shoulder, then mapped a trail of kisses up to his ear. Wu Du tilted his head and caught Duan Ling’s lips with his own, his cheeks flushed.

“The congee will burn,” Wu Du murmured.

Duan Ling grinned and released him. Wu Du scooped a bowl of the porridge and passed it over. “Careful. It’s hot.”

Slinging his feet over the side of the bed, Duan Ling asked, “How did you find me?”

“Ye’s city garrison has been monitoring Mount Song for a while now,” Wu Du replied. “Their scouts are watching the Yuan camp, but they

couldn’t act so close to the Liao border. After you were taken, the soldiers in Hejian lost track of you. I rode straight to Ye for reinforcements.”

“But where did all those oxen come from?”

“Hejian and Ye. I rounded up every thick-skinned bull I thought could run a man over,” Wu Du said. “They gave me a troop of a thousand men, but they didn’t dare stray from the city, worried your kidnapping was a Mongol scheme to lure us out.”

“What happened to them afterward?”

“Some hundred bulls of the two hundred twenty-three we released have wandered home,” Wu Du replied. “And most of the men came back unharmed. Cowardly old bastards.”

Duan Ling understood at once. The soldiers hadn’t wanted to sacrifice themselves for a new official when they saw him arrive without any troops of his own. They had hung back, making a show of fighting while Wu Du did all the work.

“It’s my fault, not theirs. I was stupid,” Duan Ling admitted.

“The one who kidnapped you was the Yuan prince?” Wu Du asked.

“Mn.”

“Was he bitten by the golden crow?”

“No,” Duan Ling replied. “He’s always… We used to wrestle back at Ming Academy.”

When Duan Ling had talked about his time in Shangjing, he’d included stories about Batu—the boy he’d brawled with on the first day of school.

Wearing a scowl that said *had I known, I would have beaten him to a pulp*, Wu Du asked, “He didn’t try anything funny like that Tangut, did he? Are they in cahoots? And where’s the Tangut—was he in the Yuan army camp?”

Why in heaven’s name would Helian Bo be in Batu’s camp? Sometimes, Duan Ling couldn’t follow Wu Du’s logic at all. He seemed to hold a particular grudge against “that Tangut” yet had immediately dismissed Batu. After their run-in, Wu Du must’ve seen Batu wasn’t his

match and deemed him harmless. But Helian Bo wasn’t his match either. Had Helian Bo made a deeper impression because they hadn’t confessed their feelings yet back at Tong Pass?

Chapter 134

DUAN LING HAD EXPECTED Wu Du to chew him out after his rescue. He'd been reckless, after all; Wu Du had even been shot as a result.

"I'm sorry," Duan Ling said. "I was careless."

"Just be more cautious next time," Wu Du said. "It was my fault for not keeping a proper eye on you. Thank goodness you're okay."

His instant forgiveness made Duan Ling feel even worse. He shuffled closer and pecked Wu Du on the lips. Wu Du laughed, stroked his hair, and handed him another bowl of congee. Once again, Duan Ling was struck by the thought that Wu Du resembled his father.

"But you were riding Skychaser," Duan Ling said. "So why didn't they—"

Wu Du put a finger to his lips, gesturing that he should lower his voice.

Duan Ling took a bite of congee, then whispered, "If they recognized the late emperor's beloved horse, why didn't they assist you in the search?"

"I almost got stabbed entering the city earlier," Wu Du replied. "They demanded to know where I stole the horse from."

Duan Ling covered his face with his hand, rendered utterly speechless.

"Rumor has it I caused the late emperor's death," Wu Du added bitterly. "My reputation is still in tatters."

"I'm sorry." To Duan Ling's mind, the Northern Expedition Army—from which many of Ye's troops had come—were his father's former troops, and therefore, in some sense, his subordinates as well. Treating Wu Du so poorly crossed the line.

"What's that got to do with you?" Wu Du said, waving the insult off. He didn't stoop to the level of army riffraff. "It'll be fine once I beat them into submission."

He rode the late emperor’s horse and mounted the late emperor’s son. Why should he give a damn about a few unruly soldiers?

After inhaling three large bowls of tender chicken and spicy ginger congee, Duan Ling felt leagues better.

“Full, or do you want some more?” Wu Du asked. “I had a whole chicken butchered. Everything’s expensive here except chicken; every household keeps some.”

“I’m stuffed,” Duan Ling said. He couldn’t help but notice that Wu Du’s cooking had improved substantially.

“Zheng Yan taught me,” Wu Du said with a grin.

“The governor’s residence is well constructed,” Duan Ling remarked, changing the subject. “Such fine wood, when the city’s so poor.”

“It was looted before,” Wu Du said. “After the last governor was taken by the Mongols, the soldiers—under the direction of their lieutenant—plundered the residence of valuables, most of which were picked apart and sold to purchase military provisions.”

Duan Ling had no words. His fellow scholars had been right: Ye was a den of wolves.

“Now that you’re fed, what’s the plan?” Wu Du asked.

“Bath first,” Duan Ling said. “I got soaked in the rain yesterday; I feel filthy.”

“Your laoye will wash you,” Wu Du declared, pulling Duan Ling into his arms and nipping at his nape.

Duan Ling’s cheeks colored. It didn’t take any great leap of the imagination to guess how Wu Du planned on “washing” him. He scolded, “You’re still wounded, stop messing around! Eat your food.”

Grinning, Wu Du let him go and went back to his congee. As he ate, he cast another glance at Duan Ling, who was watching him expectantly.

“My lord governor, you’re looking at me like a puppy. The sun’s not yet risen; it’ll be a bit before we can ask someone to heat the water.”

“Never mind then, I won’t trouble them.”

Duan Ling located a wet cloth to clean himself, and Wu Du set his bowl aside to help strip Duan Ling. His hands roamed freely over Duan Ling's bare body as he wiped him down. Before long, they were wrapped around each other again, locked in a heated kiss. Eventually, and only at Duan Ling's adamant insistence, Wu Du relented; he'd have to wait until he'd recovered for anything more.

Dawn broke, but Duan Ling had yet to fully gather his thoughts. It was to be his first day on the job. Wu Du was injured, and a mountain of cumbersome tasks beyond his immediate capacity awaited him—the first of which was repaying the people for their one hundred twenty lost oxen. Next on the docket, he needed to find a way to guard against Batu and the Mongols who could breach his walls at any moment, kill his people, plunder his crops, and burn his villages to the ground. After that, he had to prepare eighteen thousand taels of silver to pay the salaries of his father's former subordinates, or they would certainly mutiny against him. Lastly, he needed to stockpile fifty thousand dan of grain, or when the refugees from the north began to arrive in the winter, everyone would starve to death in the snow.

Of course, Duan Ling himself wouldn't starve. Wu Du would steal whatever food there was for him if he had to. And when there was nothing left to steal, he could always eat Wu Du…

As he stepped into the main hall, all eyes fixed themselves on the new governor and commandant—one to handle internal affairs, one external enemies—waiting to see how they planned to tackle these obstacles. The treasury was barren, the city walls were in desperate need of repair, and the Mongols had ridden out of their camp, their whereabouts unknown. They were probably pillaging the nearby villages as they spoke.

Even with so much to deal with, Duan Ling couldn't help but wonder—why hadn't Wu Du asked a single question about Batu? But Wu Du was sharp in this regard, rarely mentioning anyone that didn't matter. Maybe it was precisely because Duan Ling himself seldom talked about Batu that Wu Du wasn't especially wary of him.

I hope Batu never comes here, Duan Ling thought with a sigh. *How did we end up like this?*

Lin Yunqi and Sun Ting sat on opposite sides of the hall, while the rest of the seats were occupied by Wang Zheng, Yan Di, and the others who'd come with Duan Ling's party. Wu Du, dressed in a blue robe he'd left loosely tied, exposing a swath of his sturdy chest, lounged on the divan beside Duan Ling, just as he had back at the prime minister's residence. His eyes were fixed on the rain outside, his thoughts occupied with who knew what. He was probably pondering how to best discipline the Ye city garrison.

Sun Ting glanced at Wu Du, then at Duan Ling. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then hesitated, concern creasing his brow. He hadn't asked for a new governor precisely, but the governor had come because of him nonetheless. Now the question was: Could the new appointee really handle this city's affairs?

Duan Ling understood his unease. Sun Ting thought he was too young and inexperienced to manage a city, but governing was like martial arts: Everyone had their own methods and skills. A competent official knew exactly what to prioritize.

And thus, Duan Ling set about tackling his first task.

"Wang Zheng," he said, addressing the former assistant prefect. "Go to the local government office and take charge of trials and punishment. Summon all the personnel to report to you there for duty. Take the appointment letter and go now."

Lin Yunqi noted down Duan Ling's order. Though he was to be the official in charge of personnel, Duan Ling's appointments took first priority. Wang Zheng accepted his assignment and left at once.

"Our accountant isn't here yet," Duan Ling continued. "Yunqi, you'll manage the treasury for the time being. Do an audit of the books. I want you to check all the deficits and surpluses from past years."

Lin Yunqi accepted his assignment as well and departed.

Duan Ling next turned to Sun Ting, the messenger who had started everything. "It seems fate brought us together, Sun Ting, so I'll leave the residence in your hands. Select ten men to help you guard the manor."

Duan Ling slid a quick glance at Wu Du, still staring absently at the falling rain. Even so, Duan Ling knew he'd heard. In truth, as long as Wu

Du was by his side, Duan Ling didn't care how many guards were posted in the residence.

"My lord," Sun Ting ventured, obviously hesitant. "You don't know the tempers of these veterans. They're rough men; if they're brought in so abruptly and one offends you…"

"It's fine," Duan Ling said. "Now go. Anyone willing to work in the residence will receive an extra twenty dou of grain per month as part of their salary."

With that, Sun Ting was off as well.

"Yan Di," Duan Ling said, pausing to ponder for a moment. This man had been in charge of Zhao Kui's infrastructure and logistics. "I'll give you three days' time to inspect the city walls. They must be reinforced before autumn comes in earnest; the trenches and spiked barricades are all in need of repair. Besides that, figure out what means, how much money, and how many workers we'll need to restore the archery towers, gates, barricades, and watchtowers. Submit the full list to Yunqi. For labor recruitment and construction timelines, reports will go to Wu Du."

"Yes, my lord," Yan Di agreed.

"And ask Yunqi for ten taels of silver to treat the city soldiers to drinks," Duan Ling finished.

Once Yan Di excused himself to carry out his duties, only Duan Ling and Wu Du remained in the hall, sitting in silence. Duan Ling pored over the administrative records left by the previous governor—a log of daily affairs, both personal and administrative, recorded by the governor himself or his clerk. As Duan Ling flipped through the pages, another thought occurred to him.

"Did the previous governor have no family?" he wondered aloud.

"Don't know," Wu Du replied. "Perhaps he and his wife went their separate ways when disaster struck."

Duan Ling didn't know whether to laugh or cry at this suggestion.

Wu Du finally shook himself out of his abstraction and asked, "Why assemble a personal guard for the residence? Now you'll have to pay an extra twenty dou of grain apiece."

“We’re two new officials. No one out in the city knows what we’re doing or saying in the residence,” Duan Ling explained. “With ten guards walking around, they’ll definitely spread talk about what kind of person I am. News travels fast among soldiers, especially these ruffians. This way, they won’t have to guess about us for long.”

To gain the trust of the citizens of Ye, Duan Ling had to give them a window into what he was doing. Only then would they begin to feel at ease.

“Mm,” Wu Du agreed. “But with all those household guards around, I can’t lay a finger on you.”

“I can’t defeat you, the guards can’t defeat you—in fact, no one in the whole city of Ye can defeat you,” Duan Ling said with a smile. “So if you really want to manhandle me in front of them, I suppose you can do as you please. Who could stop you?”

Wu Du choked on the tea he was sipping and blushed furiously. He’d meant to tease Duan Ling, yet somehow he’d ended up the one flustered instead.

It wasn’t long before Sun Ting returned to the hall with ten soldiers and bowed to Duan Ling and Wu Du. Wu Du glanced over the men and said nothing. Sun Ting had already arranged their shifts: five on duty in the day, and the other five at night. Two would stand guard outside in the courtyard, two would patrol the residence, and one would be stationed outside the door of Duan Ling’s chambers to run errands. Satisfied, Duan Ling instructed Sun Ting to register their names with Lin Yunqi.

Lin Yunqi was next to return from inventorying the treasury. Just as Wu Du had said, the coffers hadn’t a single coin to jingle, but the city government owed the people plenty of promissory notes. Every item of value in the governor’s residence had already been sold off. Only a smattering of teacups remained.

“Was the governor unmarried?” Duan Ling asked, finding that hard to believe.

“The governor had four concubines,” Lin Yunqi replied. “Three eloped with soldiers from the city garrison, and one fled with whatever she could carry and joined a group of bandits. His lawful wife was a woman from Qiong Prefecture; when she heard the governor had been captured by

the Yuan army, she took her son and paid for an escort back to her maiden home. There's been no news of her since."

Rats fleeing a sinking ship, Duan Ling thought. "It seems Governor Lü wrung the people of Ye dry during his tenure."

Lin Yunqi had never expected Duan Ling to state the truth so baldly. Awkward, he replied, "Um, Lord Wang… We've got quite a few loan notes here attesting to the debts the people owed Governor Lü while he was ali—uh, in office."

"I see," Duan Ling said, clicking his tongue. "Owing money to his people while also lending them funds at high interest. Quite the racket."

Lin Yunqi was obviously trying to be tactful, so Duan Ling didn't press him any further. He accepted the treasury ledger, which Lin Yunqi had marked up with red ink, and a stack of loan notes.

"We've granted more loans than there are loan notes we owe, so the numbers should balance out," Lin Yunqi said.

Duan Ling considered this for a moment. "The money and grain we brought with us, if we include our salaries, should be around two thousand dan."

"We didn't spend much on the road," Lin Yunqi replied. "You and the commandant are both of the fourth rank. Your salary combined is 2,280 dan, which would be 1,100 taels of silver after conversion."

As Lin Yunqi had said, a governor and a commandant of the fourth rank drew a salary of 1,100 dan apiece. Wu Du, because he was also a military officer, received an additional eighty dan to account for armor and weapon depreciation. Their salaries combined, after exchanging the grain for silver, thus totaled 1,100 taels.

"Withdraw a thousand taels first and clear Lord Lü's debts," Duan Ling said. He cast a pointed look over at Wu Du. "As for the loans we're owed…"

Wu Du peered back at him, confused. "What are you looking at me for?"

Duan Ling's stare turned exasperated. "Everyone dismissed," he ultimately had to say.

The household guards had just arrived, only to be dismissed immediately. So much for transparency. Moments later, after a quick, hushed discussion, Duan Ling called everyone back in.

“Sun Ting,” Wu Du said. “Go to the center of the market, gather the people, and publicly burn these loan notes.”

Sun Ting was astonished. Lin Yunqi had guessed this would happen, and he nodded with a smile.

“But sir, what will you eat?” Sun Ting asked.

“My lord has spoken. No need to be concerned on his behalf,” Duan Ling said. “Remember to tell them it was the commandant’s idea.”

Sun Ting cried out at once, “Thank you, sir, on behalf of the entire city!”

Once Sun Ting left the room, Lin Yunqi began, “My lord…”

“Eighty taels a year is enough to keep us fed, if we’re frugal about it,” Duan Ling said.

“It’s not that, my lord,” Lin Yunqi said. “I have to remind you that you still need to repay the people for their oxen.”

Duan Ling had indeed almost forgotten. “I’ll think of something.”

Each ox was worth 3,000 copper coins, or 2.8 taels of silver—and that was a bit of a headache. Duan Ling needed to come up with another solution.

“I was the one who borrowed the oxen, so that’s got nothing to do with the governor,” said Wu Du. “When the time comes, I’ll till the fields myself. Just give me a call and hitch me up to the plow.”

Duan Ling burst out laughing.

Lin Yunqi understood Wu Du was only joking. “I imagine the commandant has a plan. It was just a friendly reminder.”

Duan Ling knew Wu Du found Lin Yunqi too fussy. Judging they were done for the day, he dismissed the accountant.

“All finished?” Wu Du asked.

“For now,” Duan Ling replied. “I still have a few puzzles to solve.”

“Then it’s my turn,” Wu Du said. He turned to one of the household guards. “You there, the errand runner—call the two lieutenants in charge of the city garrison over. Tell them to bring some salves for bruises and sprains. Oh, and if they have any family heirlooms—breastplates and armor, that sort of thing—put them on. Also, summon two doctors specializing in external injuries to wait in the courtyard with stretchers. I’ll speak plainly: I’m about to give them the worst beating of their lives.”

Duan Ling had no words.

Chapter 135

WITHIN THE TIME a stick of incense took to burn, the first lieutenant was sent flying, crashing into the pergola and shattering the pots of plants there. The second lieutenant stood in the courtyard, panting heavily as he stared at Wu Du.

"I said, attack me," Wu Du said.

"I don't dare raise a hand against you, sir," said the second lieutenant.

"How will I know your skill level if you don't?" Wu Du asked. "If you can block three of my attacks, you can have my position."

"Sir, you jest—"

Before he could finish, Wu Du lashed out with a kick that sent him flying too. The second lieutenant smashed into the stone spirit screen, blood spewing from his lips.

Wu Du stood at the entrance of the main hall, silhouetted by the sun at his back. "When you were given orders to move out and rescue the governor, you all hung back and watched from the rear, then came back after you couldn't find him. The last time an official appointed by the court was captured by the enemy, you weren't punished for deserting him—so now you think you can pull the same trick and get the new governor killed too?"

Duan Ling listened from within the hall but didn't say a word. *Wu Du knows everything*, he thought. The two blows he'd delivered had been brutal. Even though the lieutenant wore armor, Wu Du's tremendous inner force—like striking a bull from the other side of a mountain—had rattled through his innards, making him cough up blood.

The ten household guards watched in horror as Wu Du strode forward, sword in hand.

Sun Ting hastily intervened. "Commandant! Sir, sir, have mercy!"

Wu Du lifted the chin of the second lieutenant with the tip of his sword. "When Governor Lü was captured, the only reason the imperial

court didn’t hold you all accountable was because your new governor in there spoke up for you. Do you really think Ye would fall without your protection?”

“Commandant,” Duan Ling interceded, his tone firm. “Spare them.”

Duan Ling could sense that Wu Du genuinely wanted to kill these men. Even from several steps away, the murderous aura radiating from him was palpable. Wu Du likely wanted to execute one of them for cowardice now as a warning to the entire garrison. Sometimes, killing a man could solve a problem. However, so could sparing one.

The tip of Wu Du’s sword was already wedged in the gap between the lieutenant’s helmet and breastplate, poised to skewer him. The man trembled as he met Wu Du’s chilling gaze and realized for the first time that this new commandant would happily take his life. With his mouth full of blood, he couldn’t speak. All he could do was shake, eyes wide in a silent plea.

“You may keep your head for now.” Wu Du stepped back. “When you have a little time, ask around about who I am. Even if you were to betray the governor and me, with my skills, we won’t die. And once we escape, everyone who sold us out—their whole families—will never know peace. I’ll slaughter every last one of you like livestock.”

Wu Du turned on his heel and strode into the hall, settling back into his lazy sprawl on the divan.

“Sun Ting, bring them here,” Duan Ling said.

Sun Ting tried to pull the first lieutenant up, but the man couldn’t get back on his feet, even with help. Another household guard came to assist, and the two carried the lieutenant into the hall together.

“Give me your hand,” Duan Ling said.

The lieutenant coughed, flecks of blood bubbling from his nostrils. Duan Ling checked his pulse. “Carry the other one inside too,” he instructed.

Wu Du had kicked them both in exactly the same spot, and their broken ribs were jabbing into their lungs. Duan Ling personally realigned their bones, wrote them a prescription, and sent them home to recover.

With that done, Duan Ling issued another order: “Call the company commanders in, ten at a time. Have them report to me in order.”

Ye had originally been built as a defensive fortress, and its most important institution was its city garrison. This was different from other regions, where the governor oversaw civil affairs and the military acted as support. When it came to this border city that saw frequent skirmishes, Wu Du’s role grew increasingly more critical, while Duan Ling became the logistical backbone that supplied the troops.

The hall soon filled with nervous officers.

“Please have a seat,” Duan Ling said. “I won’t hit you.”

Only then did the men sit down. The two lieutenants Wu Du had dealt with, one surnamed Bai and the other surnamed Chu, each commanded a thousand men. The first ten commanders to enter happened to be their direct subordinates.

“Talk to me,” Duan Ling said. “Tell me your difficulties, what the soldiers under your command are like, and how you want to live.”

The men exchanged uncertain looks.

Duan Ling picked a random name from the garrison register. “You start. The commandant has a short temper. Don’t make him wait.”

Wu Du grinned and took a sip of tea.

The first company commander pondered for a moment before speaking. “Lord Governor, we have no money. The men are starving, and hungry soldiers can’t fight.”

“That’s taken care of,” Duan Ling said. “Your pay will be waiting for you when you return to the barracks. What else?”

“The bandits are a menace,” another commander chimed in.

Wu Du flipped idly through a book while the commanders talked, seemingly indifferent, but Duan Ling knew he was listening. After asking a round of questions, Duan Ling dismissed the first group and called in the next, repeating the same inquiries. These sessions went on until noon.

Rubbing his temples, Duan Ling stood up. “What are you reading?” he asked.

Wu Du held up the book to show Duan Ling. It was *The Classic of Food*. As if on cue, Lin Yunqi's steward showed up just then to ask about lunch. Duan Ling requested something simple—they couldn't afford extravagance now that they were dirt-poor.

"We've got to make money somehow," Duan Ling said, his brows knitting with worry.

Since the night Lang Junxia had whisked him away to Shangjing, he hadn't necessarily lived in luxury, but they had never lacked for money. When his father was alive, what they ate and how they lived had been similarly humble—but still the food they ate, the tea they drank, and the utensils they used had kept certain standards. With Wu Du, they'd been terribly poor for the first half year they'd lived together, but their situation had eventually improved.

"I'll figure it out," Wu Du said.

Duan Ling had assumed, now that they'd arrived in Ye, that Wu Du would be out and about during the day handling military affairs. Duan Ling himself carried the golden crow, was protected by the Radiant White Tiger Armor, and knew some martial arts—he would be quite safe left alone in the residence. But Wu Du insisted on staying glued to his side. How were they going to make any money like this?

The pair chewed in silence, thinking.

Eventually Duan Ling said, "I'll need to send a letter to Mister Fei in Liao and ask him to lend us some grain."

"Weren't they just complaining of all the brigands around here? The bandits won't be short on money," Wu Du said. "Once I'm healed, in a few more days, I'll ride up into the hills and plunder their hoards. Easy."

Years of hard life in Ye had driven many of its citizens to banditry, but those bandits needed to be eradicated as soon as possible. How much they could come away with after looting their strongholds remained to be seen.

"What was Ye's main industry, before?" Duan Ling cast his mind back, but so far as he knew, Ye had no notable exports to trade with other regions, nor had it exchanged resources with the Central Plains.

“Charcoal,” Wu Du answered between bites. “They burned wood to make charcoal, then sold it to the south. But the trees in the mountains around these parts have been over-logged.”

“And arable land is scarce,” Duan Ling said.

He’d read about the problem of soil erosion in the north. Unlike the fertile lands of the Central Plains—places such as Shangzi and Xunyang, with their rivers and green fields—the land around Ye was mostly rugged hills, and its only flat plains bordered Liao’s territory.

“We can’t cut down any more trees here,” Duan Ling said. “We’ll have to find some other way to make a living.”

The rain pattered down outside, seemingly without end, choking the air with a sticky restlessness. Duan Ling drafted his letter to Fei Hongde, then pored over the maps and records of the region. The land between Hejian and Ye had been cultivated in the past, and had only been abandoned due to the constant and unpredictable raids by first the Khitan and now the Mongols.

It seemed the former governor had had no interest in this and been content to let the people fend for themselves. Yet even that was understandable, in a way. Any official transferred here would hope to be transferred out again as soon as possible. The nation belonged to someone else anyway; all they needed was to get by and skim what they could off the top while they were here.

Duan Ling spent the next three rainy days familiarizing himself with the city through maps and county records. Wu Du, meanwhile, spent the time acquainting himself with the garrison.

Once the rain stopped, they roamed the city themselves.

Since Wu Du had disciplined the two lieutenants, the troops had been on their best behavior. Whether their obedience was genuine or merely self-preservation remained to be seen, but at least they wouldn’t cause any trouble in the short term. Each side was now observing the other. Wu Du, preferring to keep the soldiers busy, arranged patrol shifts for the entire garrison. Duan Ling spent his time inspecting the city of Ye and digging into the mess that was Hejian.

Originally, the Hebei region's commandery office had been Shangzi. After ratifying the peace treaty with Liao that ceded them the city, the court moved it south to Hejian. Yet it quickly moved again—Hejian's commandant must oversee defense of the border, and so the commandery office moved to Ye. Hejian's city garrison was helmed by the two lieutenants surnamed Qin and Qi who had emerged to fight the enemy during the Mongols' aborted raid a few days ago. Hejian and Ye were each home to two thousand soldiers, for a total of four thousand men under Wu Du's command. The two cities stood eighty li apart, half a day's ride at a gallop.

Over the past several days, endless reports from Hejian's officials had arrived. Duan Ling hadn't summoned them in person just yet, merely marking their reports with *Read* when there was the occasional back-and-forth.

Located almost four hundred li to the southeast of Ye was the city of Chang. It was even poorer than Ye and Hejian—not even the Mongols cared to plunder it, leaving bandits to overrun the area. Seeing how hard the travel between cities was on the messenger, Duan Ling instructed him to come no more than every ten days.

The first order of business, then, was to restore communication between the three cities and establish some kind of system so that they could sound the alarm when attacked.

"How's your shoulder?" Duan Ling asked after he finished packing his bags.

Wu Du flexed his arm to demonstrate.

"Where're we off to?" he asked, guessing that Duan Ling wanted to take a jaunt out of the city.

"Let's go to Hejian and back, check out our territory," Duan Ling replied.

Wu Du assembled a squadron of soldiers for protection and packed the rest of their necessities, and the two set out the same day. Duan Ling rode Skychaser, while Wu Du followed on the finest steed the city had to offer.

The late summer weather, after the rains had passed, was pleasantly cool.

“What’s today’s date?” Duan Ling asked.

“Twenty-first of the sixth month,” Wu Du replied. “Almost Qixi.”

Duan Ling hadn’t expected to spend Qixi in Hebei this year. He reined Skychaser to a halt atop a hill and gazed out at the distant land across the river. That was Xunyang—where lay the city of Runan, the place that had once been his hometown.

“Liao’s territory, now controlled by the Mongols,” Wu Du said.

They sat astride their horses, shoulder to shoulder, as the crisp breeze sent waves rippling through the grass.

“Nine years ago, Runan was prosperous,” Duan Ling said. “It must be in ruins now.”

“Want to go have a look?” Wu Du asked.

Duan Ling shook his head. He had no lingering affection for the Duan family, and he rarely spoke to Wu Du about his childhood. For him, different parts of his memories belonged to different people: The present belonged to Wu Du, those days in Shangjing belonged to his father, and his time in Runan belonged to Lang Junxia.

“Let’s go,” Duan Ling said, resuming their ride along the river.

This region, called Xunyang, took its name from this great river, the Xun, which ran straight through the Hebei region. With the mountains rising in the south and the river coursing through the north, this region’s name was thus tagged with *yang*, for sun-facing. The people of Ye and Hejian spoke with a slight Xunyang accent, and hearing it filled Duan Ling with nostalgia. In the past, his father had held the title Prince of Beiliang, and his fief had been the entirety of the Hebei region. Somehow, this rough and barren wilderness felt like home.

“How does it feel?” Wu Du asked him.

“Like an inheritance,” Duan Ling replied.

Wu Du smiled in understanding.

“What’s that?” Duan Ling asked, noticing a watchtower on a slight rise along the riverbank.

“Lord Wang, that was once a watchtower,” Sun Ting answered. “There used to be a few villages near the Xun River, but the people are all gone after the Mongols started raiding the area.”

“All gone?” Duan Ling asked.

It was a softer way to put it. The villagers had likely been slaughtered, their homes burned to the ground, leaving only the stone watchtower standing with its blackened walls. Duan Ling directed their party into the abandoned village for a look. They picked through the scattered ruins and discovered shards of pottery and rusted metal farming tools.

“Have a team comb through this place,” Duan Ling said. “Gather any usable hoes and shovels, but discard the wooden handles. Bring the metal back; we can reuse it.”

Wu Du grinned from the side, his amusement clear. Duan Ling scratched his head sheepishly, feeling like a trash collector. “Waste not, want not,” he explained.

The area was so desolate that people rarely came around; the ruins had been left practically untouched. Standing on the perimeter of the old village, Duan Ling raised his head to study the tower.

“Let’s take a look up there,” he said to Wu Du.

“Sure,” Wu Du agreed.

The pair entered the watchtower, which stood over thirty feet tall, its solid brick walls reinforced by wooden beams on the hollow interior.

“There should be a bell at the top—”

“Watch out!” Wu Du shouted, flicking open his brass knuckles.

Duan Ling’s blood froze. An ambush—but who would attack them here?!

Chapter 136

A MAN CLAD HEAD TO TOE in black rushed toward them. Before Duan Ling could react, a cold glint flashed before his eyes—a needle shooting toward him. Wu Du tackled Duan Ling to the ground, sending them both tumbling from the watchtower's high landing.

Another three needles hissed over their heads, closely followed by a slashing blade as another man in black appeared.

The paired assassins swung their swords in unison. Mid-fall, Duan Ling managed to plant a foot on one of the staircase steps and launch himself, twisting his body to shield Wu Du with his back. The blades sliced clean through his outer robes, but they couldn't penetrate the Radiant White Tiger Armor. Wu Du wrapped an arm around Duan Ling and turned to kick off the inner wall, pivoting off the post to vault over the assassins' heads.

Powder scattered through the air in two soft puffs. The assassins dropped instantly, plunging to the bottom of the empty tower. Duan Ling hadn't even seen Wu Du move, yet he had already taken Duan Ling's hand to dash down the stairs. Below them, the assassins scrambled to their feet and bolted from the tower.

Sun Ting was supervising his subordinates, who were still searching the ruins, when the sudden appearance of two strange men in black startled him. "Assassins!" he roared.

The soldiers drew their swords. Wu Du barked, "Out of the way!"

The black-clad men sprinted away. Duan Ling loosed two arrows in rapid succession, but the assassins, alerted by the air-piercing whistle, dodged aside before continuing their mad dash toward Xun River. Just as they were about to enter the water, they stumbled.

The pair collapsed on the riverbank at almost the exact same time. Duan Ling and Wu Du slowed. Wu Du was clutching Duan Ling's hand, and Duan Ling's heart was racing. They watched as the assassins convulsed on the silty bank, writhing until they curled up and went still.

The soldiers approached their bodies cautiously, bewildered. Where had a pair of assassins come from?

“Don’t touch them,” Wu Du instructed as he and Duan Ling advanced.

“That was your poison?” Duan Ling asked.

“Yeah.” Wu Du frowned, using a stick to lift the assassins’ masks.

“You know them?”

Wu Du shook his head, puzzled. “They don’t look Mongolian.”

“Could they be…” Duan Ling’s brow furrowed. He studied Wu Du’s face until Wu Du lifted his eyes. Their gazes locked.

“It’s possible,” Wu Du replied, his voice low.

Duan Ling had been wondering if these men were sent by Cai Yan. It seemed Wu Du suspected the same—but they couldn’t discuss this now, not with Sun Ting and the other soldiers around.

“Are they Mongols?” Sun Ting asked. “That was a close call.”

Duan Ling nodded absently, still deep in thought. “Leave the bodies here. Don’t touch them.”

Duan Ling knew Wu Du had used a lethal poison in their moment of desperation, but he was surprised at how fast it had worked nonetheless. It was so rare to witness Wu Du using these particular skills that he’d almost forgotten poison was his specialty.

“Are we going back up the tower?” Wu Du asked.

“Yes,” Duan Ling said, resolute.

The incident had cast a pall over the expedition, but there was still work to be done. Sun Ting insisted on sweeping the whole area. Duan Ling initially thought to stop him. Given the soldiers’ abilities, they would be no match for any further assassins they might discover. Before he could say a word, however, Wu Du shot him a look—they should let Sun Ting do as he wished, lest Duan Ling hurt his pride.

Wu Du waited until they were back inside the watchtower to speak. “They were from the shadow squad.”

“How many men are in the shadow squad total?” Duan Ling asked.

“One hundred exactly,” Wu Du replied. “Persistent bastards.”

“It’s fine. Honestly, it’s a good thing they showed up now. If they’d attacked when you weren’t around, that would’ve been the end of the line. What was the poison you used just now?”

“Life Erosion,” Wu Du said. “Any contact with the eyes or other orifices, and the victim will die before they take a hundred paces.”

“Do you have a lot of it?”

“Not much. It’s one of my few poisons that kills immediately.”

When Duan Ling had first gotten to know Wu Du, he’d been constantly nervous, worried he’d spill the wrong bottle by accident and die an awful death. Later, once he realized most lethal poisons Wu Du used were easily identifiable, he’d relaxed his guard—but after seeing this one, he was back to feeling wary again.

“Is your hand okay?” Duan Ling asked. He thought he’d seen Wu Du flick the powder into the air.

“Don’t worry,” Wu Du reassured him. “Poisoning is done with internal strength; I use inner force to project the powder, so there’s no residue left on my hands.”

But Duan Ling was still worried by the time they reached the top of the tower, so Wu Du washed his hands in a rain puddle. He settled down on the floor and pulled Duan Ling onto his lap. Together, they gazed into the distance.

“I wonder how many men the shadow squad deployed,” Wu Du said. “Ye won’t be safe either unless we find a chance to eliminate them all.”

“Send the bodies back to the capital. If the court recognizes them, it could serve as a warning to him,” Duan Ling suggested.

“With Wuluohou Mu skulking around, no bodies will be allowed to make it into Jiang Prefecture,” Wu Du said.

Duan Ling realized he was right. Lang Junxia would intercept anything they sent along—disposing of evidence must be his specialty.

Sending the corpses back to Jiang Prefecture would only cost any escort they deployed their lives.

“Don’t dwell on it,” Wu Du said. “Handling this is my job.”

Duan Ling nodded. There wasn’t much to be afraid of with Wu Du by his side. They’d weathered so many tempests already; a few shadow squad assassins were a trivial problem.

A breeze wound past. From atop the watchtower, they could see the mountains and plains across the river, a picturesque scene.

“If the Mongols march down from the north, you could spot them from this watchtower,” Duan Ling mused.

“Mm,” Wu Du hummed, still preoccupied by the assassins.

The vista spread before Duan Ling’s eyes had validated his theory, as well as the plans he’d made prior to departure. “There should be more villages over there,” he said, pointing along the river. “Do you think every village has a watchtower like this one?”

“Don’t know. Shall we investigate?” Wu Du shook himself out of his thoughts. “Where to next?”

“Let’s go,” Duan Ling said.

He dragged Wu Du downstairs and gathered the soldiers to head out, following the river. Sure enough, another ruin waited about twelve li from the first, with a similar watchtower topped by a bell. Around it were four tile-roofed houses and a stretch of deserted fields.

Over a decade ago, Chen and Liao had clashed here. Whenever the Khitan would invade, the villagers would ring the bells to sound the alarm. The Chen and Liao armies had fought over the same stretch of borderlands until both were exhausted, and in the end, the Khitan had withdrawn. Most of the watchtower bells had been melted down into iron and forged into weapons.

“No one lives here anymore,” Wu Du said. “Otherwise, ringing the bells as an alarm would be a decent idea.”

“You can’t hear the bells when the wind is strong,” Sun Ting said, speaking up.

“But you can see from afar,” Duan Ling countered. “The watchtowers are spaced twelve li apart. If someone lit beacon fires here, they’d be visible.”

Duan Ling unfolded a map. To the soldiers he said, “Split up and search for the other towers. Sketch a rough map and mark their locations on it. Go!”

He was thrilled by this discovery. If they could restore all the watchtowers between Ye and Hejian, turning them into a beacon relay system, it would form a miniature Great Wall. If the Yuan army wanted to advance into Chen territory, they had to cross Xun River—and whether they targeted Ye or Hejian first, having the towers raise the alarm between the cities just might deal the Mongols a fatal blow.

Wu Du, however, remained grim, his brows locked in an unravelable knot.

Aside from the flat plains where the watchtowers stood, temporary outposts could also be built along the rugged hills and cliffs. Anything nestled against the hills, on treacherous terrain, would have far less risk of being dismantled by the Mongols. Duan Ling spent the entire day with Wu Du, surveying half the route. When the soldiers returned at nightfall, Duan Ling studied the sketch they’d brought back by the firelight as he gnawed on his rations.

“Any ideas yet?” Duan Ling asked Wu Du.

“Not yet,” Wu Du replied, temporarily setting aside the issue of the shadow squad. “Any good discoveries?”

Duan Ling showed Wu Du the map, now marked with the watchtowers Sun Ting’s men had found. A total of twelve towers stood between the two cities, all located in abandoned villages.

“There aren’t enough of them,” Wu Du said. “And these here are too far apart.”

“We can build more,” Duan Ling said. “There’s nothing but hills around here. If we erect fire beacon outposts in the hills, and then the ones deeper in the mountains use bells to transmit their signals, the combination of both beacons and bells should work.”

Mongolian horses were bred on the steppes; they weren't suited for the mountainous terrain here, which made the desolate hills south of Xun River perfect for these outposts. And in using a hybrid system of beacons and bells, they would be able to roughly determine from which direction the Mongols were invading.

With this plan settled, a huge weight lifted from Duan Ling's shoulders. As soon as he returned to Ye, he would divide the outlying area into thirty outposts and station five soldiers at each watchtower. The plains outposts could even grow their own food to add to their provided rations.

The following day, he and Wu Du arrived in Hejian. Duan Ling could sense that Wu Du was more vigilant now, his eyes tracking every rustle in the grass and trees.

"Lord Wang," Lieutenant Qin said, greeting Duan Ling with a bow.

The lieutenant's full name was Qin Long, a fine-looking man with thick brows and large eyes. After Wu Du had disciplined them following the Mongol attack, Lieutenant Qin had instructed his men to apologize to Duan Ling, and had prepared food and hot water for their rest.

Hejian was a more prosperous city than Ye, once a frontline stronghold against the Khitan in the Hebei region. The commandant's office —now technically Wu Du's residence, should he choose to occupy it—was at the center of the city. Historically, for the convenience of military operations, the commandant's residence had been in Hejian. But over the years, as power shifted, Ye had become the new front line.

"You've defended Hejian well all this time," Duan Ling said, wiping his hands clean with a hot towel.

"You flatter me, my lord," Qin Long said, personally attending Duan Ling. "It's only because the Mongols rarely come this way."

Hejian was different in many ways from Ye. After the previous commandant had died in battle, the two cities had operated independently. Though they were nominally under the commandant's authority, functionally, Hejian's troops operated as Qin Long's private army. Duan Ling could tell at a glance that this man was a schemer who merely paid lip service to his superior's commands; perhaps he'd even seen him and Wu

Du from atop the city wall on the night of the skirmish and deliberately withheld his aid.

That spring, when Ögedei had breached the border, the last commandant had fallen to the enemy while awaiting reinforcements from Hejian that never arrived.

If the court hadn't appointed Wu Du, then the one most qualified to be promoted to commandant would've been Qin Long.

"Where's the county magistrate?" Wu Du asked.

He had sensed the problem too. Although Qin Long held the position of lieutenant, he appeared to be acting as the city lord of Hejian. The county magistrate who should have been here hadn't shown himself when his new superiors had arrived; the only one to greet them had been Qin Long. The lieutenant had most likely already sent the county magistrate off somewhere so the man couldn't get in his way.

Qin Long would have to be eliminated sooner or later—but they couldn't afford to kill him without determining what other tricks he had up his sleeve. Furthermore, while getting rid of Qin Long would be the work of a moment, someone would have to fill his shoes. Duan Ling and Wu Du already had too much on their plates; it was impossible for them to manage Hejian as well.

As expected, Qin Long replied, "Magistrate Lin has gone to inspect the villages and isn't yet aware of your arrival. I've already sent men to fetch him."

Fine. I'll let you enjoy your power a little while longer, Duan Ling thought. *But I'll be dealing with you later.*

Lieutenant Qi was apparently still recuperating at home. Wu Du didn't demand to see him. Instead he grilled Qin Long on troop deployments, pay, supplies, and personnel assignments. Unlike the commanders in Ye, Qin Long didn't complain of poverty when the subject of salary grain was mentioned; he simply said he would manage.

"Do you have enough?"

"Of course," Qin Long replied with a smile. "I can't possibly have the lord governor paying out of his pocket. Hejian hasn't fought many battles in

recent years; the men are scraping by."

"Just ask if you're running short," Duan Ling insisted. "Lieutenant Qin, don't hesitate to speak up."

"Hejian is fortunate that Lord Wang loves the people like his own children," Qin Long said. "Our only wish is that my lord moves to Hejian soon and takes up governance."

"Moving the governor's office to Hejian was the former governor Lord Lü's idea," Duan Ling said. "I've no such plans."

The previous governor had scorned Ye's harsh environs and especially abhorred the sandstorms that sometimes swept through. He'd hoped to relocate to Hejian, but bureaucratic delays and his own desire for a transfer back to the capital had stalled his plans.

Qin Long certainly didn't want Duan Ling to come to Hejian; the question was obviously a test. And though Duan Ling himself genuinely didn't want to move, he couldn't stand a subordinate who tried to outsmart him. If they were peers of equal rank or higher playing politics, he could let it pass, but what business did a mere lieutenant commanding an army of two thousand—stationed in the middle of nowhere, defending a godforsaken border city—have playing mind games?

"Do you wish to be transferred back to the capital, Lieutenant Qin?" Duan Ling asked. Perhaps he'd write a letter to transfer him away and appoint another lieutenant from Ye to manage Hejian instead.

Chapter 137

YET TO DUAN LING'S SURPRISE, not only did Qin Long avoid his question, he volleyed it directly back.

"Ah, does Lord Wang wish to be transferred back to the capital?"

Duan Ling was caught flat-footed. Something more seemed to flow beneath Qin Long's words. Perhaps this man would be harder to deal with than he'd first assumed.

"Court officials serve three-year terms," Duan Ling replied. "So I'll leave eventually."

"But you don't have to," Qin Long said, offering Duan Ling a cup of tea with deference. "The three-year term is a mere formality. Everyone wants to be assigned to the prosperous places; by the same token, no one wants to end up in the poor, remote parts—never mind a contested border town like Ye. Besides, frontier cities have their own exemptions. They aren't restricted by the three-year rotation."

Duan Ling couldn't argue with Qin Long on that point, he had to admit.

"When Lord Lü was here, he dreamed of being recalled every day," Qin Long continued. "He never cared to settle down. But now that you've arrived, Lord Wang, it would be a fortunate thing if you wished to stay. I could tell from the first moment I met you, my lord, that you are a pragmatic man."

Duan Ling saw exactly what Qin Long was talking his way around: *You're only passing through. Everyone spends their time on assignment here pondering how to return to the capital, and eventually, they all do.*

If he didn't share in the same joys and sufferings as the people—if he treated this place as solely a stepping stone to greater promotion and wealth—how could he be a good governor?

"You are right," Duan Ling said, cupping his hands in a polite salute. "I will remember your words for life."

Now it was Qin Long's turn to be astonished. He'd merely been engaging in some casual flattery. *The men wish you'd stay even after your term ends in three years* were perfunctory words; such exchanges were empty and usually laughed off by both sides.

He'd never imagined that the youngest governor in history would extract an entirely different meaning.

"You're still young, my lord," Qin Long said with a smile. "You are certain to achieve great things in the future."

Wu Du stood up. "Since Magistrate Lin is still away, relay our orders to him when he returns. We'll be heading back now. Business will otherwise continue as usual. The Mongols are likely to attack in the next few days, and I have much to see to in Ye to prepare. Before anything else, let us all work together to ride out this storm."

"The Mongols are going to attack?" Qin Long asked in surprise. "How do you know?"

Duan Ling had related Batu's lofty promise to Wu Du: that he would seize Ye within ten days. After probing Duan Ling thoroughly on Batu's temperament, Wu Du understood that he was a man who stood by his words. Four days had passed since this declaration—so they had another five and a half days at most.

"Expect my letters tomorrow," Wu Du said, not bothering with an explanation. "Time is short."

Qin Long had intended to keep Duan Ling in Hejian overnight, but Wu Du refused him with a wave. Qin Long tried again, saying, "There's a hot spring on the mountain behind Hejian, excellent for soaking away fatigue."

At that, Wu Du visibly perked up—but Duan Ling was so swamped with work that staying really wasn't an option. He dragged Wu Du away, smiling apologetically. "Maybe next time."

Duan Ling revised his opinion. He was starting to like this guy; he was smart. How things went in the future, though, remained to be seen.

"You don't like him?" Duan Ling asked once they were back outside, riding ahead on Skychaser.

“Not really,” Wu Du said. “He’s too slick. Every word has a double meaning.”

Wu Du’s eyes darted around the streets of Hejian, observing the people. Hejian’s streets and houses were better built than Ye’s, but the ragged residents watching them pass seemed poorer. Occasionally, they spotted men in their prime idly loitering by the roadside rather than working the fields.

“They’re lazy,” Duan Ling said. “Have you noticed?”

“Thugs,” Wu Du replied. “Look inside the tavern.”

The tavern they passed was packed with burly men sitting around drinking. They didn’t appear to be either soldiers or starving peasants. Duan Ling had already sensed that Qin Long was Hejian’s biggest fish. In his years of lording over the city, he’d kept plenty of men around who did no honest work. It was probable that he was colluding with the local bandits, or was even their chief.

“We’ll clean house here another day,” Wu Du said. “Let’s get back and find Yan Di. *Hyah!*”

Skychaser dashed away, leaving Duan Ling’s household guards in the dust. Wu Du and Duan Ling tore through wild hills rolling with waves of grass and turned down thorny roads. At this breakneck pace, they reached Ye in less than half a day, arriving just as dusk descended.

“Call Yan Di over,” Wu Du ordered. “We’ll start the construction of the beacon outposts immediately.”

He circled the points on the map they’d discussed and issued Yan Di the command. Yan Di, reeking of alcohol, chuckled and gave Wu Du a thumbs-up.

“You know your stuff, sir,” he said. “But we don’t have enough laborers.”

“Use the garrison troops,” Wu Du said. “Can you get this done in three days?”

“What? No,” Yan Di sputtered.

“We only need the bare bones,” Wu Du said. “The Mongols will attack in a few days. The posts only need to be able to send signals.”

“Oh, that’s easy then,” Yan Di said.

“I’ll get you the men. Go now,” Wu Du said. “Use everyone in the city if you have to. Send a message to Hejian; tell Qin Long to keep a constant watch on the final beacon.”

Wu Du jotted down a list of names and instructed Sun Ting to accompany Yan Di and see to the deployment.

“You should go too,” Duan Ling said to Wu Du.

Wu Du pointed at the darkening sky outside; it was too late to get anything done, and too dangerous for Duan Ling to be alone. “I’m not leaving your side,” he said.

“It’s only for a little while,” Duan Ling insisted. “What’s a bit of time? The city is more important.”

“*Your safety* is more important,” Wu Du answered.

This man was impossible. Duan Ling thought once again that they had to find a broader solution—if Wu Du had to remain within two feet of him at all times, nothing would get done. Once they’d rebuffed the Mongol invasion, they’d need to strike fast to rid themselves of the shadow squad assassins. He couldn’t work like this.

“If you think that Mongol is coming, then there’s no doubt he is,” Wu Du said. “The fire bulls we used that night were flashy, but they only trampled their camp a bit. Few of their men died. Those five thousand soldiers will be at our gates sooner or later.”

Wu Du turned his eyes to the map hanging on the wall. “Our scouts already found their camp vacated. We don’t know where they’re hiding now. If we could take a few thousand men and strike first, this wouldn’t be such a headache.”

“Splitting our forces right now isn’t wise,” Duan Ling said. “Better to wait for them to come to us.”

That night, the sky was clear. Duan Ling climbed to the second floor of the residence, breathing in the fresh air, and gazed over the myriad lights glowing from the city’s houses. He was already starting to think of this place as home.

He’d seldom felt this way before. Life in the wilds was too lonely, and life in the big city was too noisy. But now, having traveled such a great distance with Wu Du to reach this city, he had surprisingly begun to feel it belonged solely to the two of them.

“What if Qin Long abandons us during the attack?” Duan Ling wondered aloud.

“He won’t,” Wu Du assured him. “I beat him to a pulp the other day. He’s smart; he knows the two of us will escape even if the city falls. But if Ye is lost, his good days are over.”

Qin Long wouldn’t want Duan Ling interfering with whatever arrangements he’d made in Hejian—but he also wouldn’t want to lose Ye entirely. If the city fell, Hejian would be next. Not to mention, the court wouldn’t look kindly on him if imperially appointed officials kept dropping like flies in his territory.

“Go to bed,” Wu Du said. “After we win this battle, I’ll take you to the hot spring.”

Duan Ling grinned and followed Wu Du back downstairs to their room.

For the next several days in a row, Duan Ling’s plate was piled high with troubles: The autumn harvest was looming, the messenger he’d sent to Liao hadn’t yet returned, Ye’s stores of grain would only last them until the eleventh month, and the city had less than twenty catties of charcoal left to heat their houses. Surviving the impending winter had become Duan Ling’s most pressing problem.

“Why the constant frown?” Wu Du whispered, looking down at Duan Ling beneath him. Seeing Duan Ling’s tightly knit brows made his furrow as well. He brushed their noses together and dropped soft kisses on Duan Ling’s lips.

“Too much to do,” Duan Ling whispered back, reaching down to untie Wu Du’s underrobes.

“Laoye will provide for you,” Wu Du vowed between kisses. Gazing down into his eyes, he added, “And your people.”

Duan Ling laughed. The road ahead might be fraught with challenges, but at least in this moment, basking in Wu Du's searing heat, he felt as safe as could be.

Dawn found the two fast asleep, still naked. Duan Ling's head was pillowed on the crook of Wu Du's neck, moving with the rise and fall of his chest; Wu Du's arm was wrapped securely around Duan Ling's shoulders.

With a bang, the door burst open.

Wu Du bolted upright, his sword drawn and pointed at the door. Duan Ling was undisturbed—he rolled onto his side and continued snoozing.

"They say a moment's pleasure on a spring night is worth a thousand gold," said a familiar voice. "But forgive me. I must remind you that the Mongols are coming."

Duan Ling's eyes snapped open. "Zheng Yan?!"

Right away he crawled to hide behind Wu Du, poking his head out to peek at the newcomer, eyes wide with joy.

Wu Du snatched his own robes and threw them at Duan Ling for him to cover himself, then snapped at Zheng Yan, "Out! Get the hell out!"

Having traveled in haste for almost half a month, Zheng Yan was filthy from the road. With a short, curved billhook slung over his shoulder and a sword in his hand, he sauntered away to the main hall.

The couple climbed out of bed to wash up. Duan Ling was exuberant—Zheng Yan had come! All his problems were solved.

Zheng Yan helped himself to a seat in the main hall. When they arrived, he was scratching an itch, the cloth of his robes so muddy their original color was impossible to discern. Beside him was another man in a similarly unkempt state.

"Oho, so glad to see me?" Zheng Yan teased at the sight of Duan Ling practically bouncing with joy. "Fancy a change in flavor?"

"Piss off!" Duan Ling said, laughing, and gave him a playful kick.

"Greetings, Lord Wang," said the other man with a bow.

Duan Ling nodded politely. Glancing toward Zheng Yan, he asked, “Won’t you introduce him?”

“Don’t you two know each other?” Zheng Yan was perplexed. “I ran into him about to be captured by bandits on the road, so I saved him. He said he was coming to take up a post with you here.” He looked at the filthy man beside him. “What’s your name again?”

“I… I’m surnamed Shi,” he said.

The man looked barely out of his teens. Judging by his appearance, he was younger than both Zheng Yan and Wu Du, perhaps only a little older than Duan Ling himself.

“Shi Qi!” Duan Ling exclaimed, remembering at once—here was the man they had requested from the prison. He quickly apologized and tugged him closer. “You’re finally here! It must’ve been a rough journey. How was the road otherwise?”

“Had I not saved him, he’d be a bandit’s bride by now,” Zheng Yan piped up.

“Um…” Shi Qi flushed crimson, mortified.

Did a serious word ever come out of Zheng Yan’s mouth? Duan Ling waved him off and said, “My fault. Thank heavens you were blessed with good luck.”

“The prime minister said you had instructed I be escorted here,” Shi Qi said in a rush. “But I’m a criminal; I didn’t want to burden you, so I set off on my own.”

Duan Ling nodded. Shi Qi’s crime wasn’t a minor one—but it wasn’t anything horrific. After Zhao Kui had fallen, the imperial court had investigated every one of his men and discovered that Shi Qi had embezzled some money. The young man had been sentenced to death, but such a crime was easily absolved with a single word from Li Yanqiu. It had been nothing to ask the court for him.

From this frail young man’s perspective, however, Duan Ling had saved his life—he’d given him a second chance.

Chapter 138

DUAN LING WASTED no more time exchanging pleasantries with Shi Qi, instead summoning Lin Yunqi directly to cross-check the ledgers with him. After that, he directed Shi Qi to bathe and assume his duties without delay.

While they were talking, Wu Du entered the hall and gave Shi Qi a nod. The young man rose to bow, but Wu Du raised a hand to stop him, then pointed down at the table for him to stay put as he took his own seat to one side to wait for breakfast. A household guard served him tea, but otherwise, Wu Du remained silent, listening to the conversation in the room.

Everyone was afraid of Wu Du. Since his arrival, his commanding presence pervaded every room he stepped into, as if he was the one who held the authority here. Even Duan Ling had noticed it.

Once Lin Yunqi had explained everything, Shi Qi left to clean himself up and prepare for his post. Only Zheng Yan, Wu Du, and Duan Ling remained in the hall. The servants brought them breakfast, and the three talked as they ate.

“What are you doing here?” Wu Du demanded.

“Searching for something,” Zheng Yan replied. “Can you guess what?”

Duan Ling glanced at Zheng Yan, then at Wu Du. “The Guardian of the Realm?”

Neither answered him. Duan Ling nodded to himself and didn’t press further; he knew he was right.

“How long are you staying?” Wu Du asked.

“Till I find it,” Zheng Yan replied. Evidently, he was in no hurry.

On the inside, Duan Ling rejoiced—he had to keep Zheng Yan with them in Ye. This way, Wu Du could actually ride into battle. He’d been feeling more and more that he’d made a serious misstep in not having prepared properly for this possibility before his departure.

“What about the Mongols?” Wu Du asked.

Zheng Yan tossed a sheet of parchment, stained with blood, onto the table. “Last night, a messenger tried to cross the border heading northeast. I can’t read it—it’s all yours.”

Duan Ling snatched up the missive. The parchment, filled with Mongol script, was a letter from Batu requesting five thousand more soldiers from Ögedei, who was stationed in the west, with the intent to seize Ye in the next fortnight.

After he translated it aloud, Wu Du scoffed. “Borjigin knows ten days won’t cut it. He’s asking for more troops.”

“He already has five thousand men,” Duan Ling said. “Another five thousand will bring it to ten. He’s truly determined to take the city.”

“Well, the messenger died at my hand, so it looks like this letter won’t make it,” Zheng Yan said.

“Multiple messengers would’ve been dispatched at different intervals to avoid interception,” Duan Ling said. “I’ll write to Han Bin at Yubi Pass and tell him to be on the lookout. He can ambush the Yuan army as they try and pass through.”

If Ögedei were to send reinforcements, the troops would need to take the road outside Yubi Pass. The path was so treacherous and easily ambushed that even his father had avoided it on his march to Shangjing. If Han Bin was feeling agreeable, he could cut the Yuan army off before they ever reached Ye.

“How will you persuade Han Bin to deploy men on your behalf?” Wu Du asked. “If I were him, I might not.”

“Let me think,” Duan Ling said, getting up and pacing the room. “The Mongols might abandon the attack if reinforcements don’t come—but even without reinforcements, Batu’s five thousand men are going to pose a challenge.”

Wu Du set his chopsticks down. “We must drive the Mongols north of the Xun River this time. If the attacking army doesn’t exceed five thousand, I can beat them. Zheng Yan, map the path you took coming here. I’m leaving the safety of the residence to you—I don’t trust anyone else.”

He looked to Duan Ling for approval. Duan Ling mulled it over for a moment and nodded. Wu Du fetched his sword and went to call a meeting with the company commanders. There was too much to do; not a single moment could be wasted.

Now that Zheng Yan was here, Duan Ling at last felt relief. Finally, he could send Wu Du out on campaign.

“What’s with the smile?” Zheng Yan studied Duan Ling. “Missed me so much? Why don’t you give me a kiss?”

Duan Ling gazed at Zheng Yan, finding him more adorable the longer he looked. He’d never thought him to be so handsome and fine before. “From now on, you have to stay here with us and never leave.”

“If you marry me, I’ll consider it,” Zheng Yan said with a straight face. “Once we’re wed, I would never leave your side—I’d never even flirt with another again.”

“Stop joking,” Duan Ling said. “Zheng Yan, you’re not serious at all. How can men marry?”

“In the southern parts, Huaiyin and Minbei, men are considered properly married when they enter the nuptial halls and exchange bows,” Zheng Yan said. With a lopsided grin he continued, “They can even bow to heaven and earth together to complete the wedding ritual.”

Duan Ling blinked. Such a custom was news to him.

“If you want me to stick around, I’ll need an incentive,” Zheng Yan said.

“Anything but that.”

Zheng Yan pondered for a moment, then said, “Okay. Bathe me.”

Duan Ling stared, utterly speechless.

An hour later, Zheng Yan was basking in the afternoon sun, his eyes squinted against the light, as he soaked in a large tub in the middle of the courtyard. The governor of Hebei, his sleeves rolled to the elbow, scrubbed his back with a bored look on his face. Zheng Yan’s silk glove lay near the tub, leaving the white tiger tattoo on the back of his hand exposed.

“What does the tattoo mean?” Duan Ling asked.

“Wu Du never told you?”

“I know about the sect’s origins,” Duan Ling said. “But why is yours on your hand, Wu Du’s on his neck, and Changliu-jun’s on his face?”

“Oho, you’ve seen Changliu-jun’s?” Zheng Yan asked. “Don’t they say anyone who sees it dies? Have you seen Wuluohou Mu’s? Guess where it is.”

Thank goodness I didn’t say Lang Junxia’s is on his arm, or he’d be suspicious for sure, Duan Ling thought. Aloud, he said, “Changliu-jun is my student. I’m teaching him reading and writing.”

“He can’t read?!” Zheng Yan gasped in exaggerated shock.

Duan Ling was silent. Was that reaction really necessary?

Zheng Yan laughed, clearly enjoying teasing him. He schooled his expression and said, “Everyone has their own particular reason for the location of the tattoo, but ultimately, none of them are easily seen. Those who lay eyes on them come to only one end: death.”

Duan Ling pondered this.

“Just think,” Zheng Yan said. “Doesn’t Wu Du always keep his covered with his collar?”

“But I’m looking at your tattoo right now, and you aren’t trying to kill me,” Duan Ling pointed out.

“Because I simply can’t bear to—so I suppose you can look as you please,” Zheng Yan replied breezily. “Now fetch my clothes from my bag.”

Duan Ling opened the sack and spotted a handful of caltrops inside. He lifted one up to the sunlight and saw it glinting with the blue sheen of a lethal poison.

“Don’t touch that,” Zheng Yan drawled. “Your man might be a poison master, but even he won’t be able to save you in time if you cut your finger on one of those.”

“I didn’t know you used poison too,” Duan Ling said, replacing the caltrop and pulling out a fresh robe.

“They’re not mine. Found them on the road.”

Duan Ling stopped. A thought struck him—could these be traps from the shadow squad? Had Zheng Yan run into them on the way?

He let the thought pass quickly by, changing the topic. “Traveling all the way out here—are you not needed to guard His Majesty?”

“His Majesty is the one who sent me. Xie You can remind him to take his medicine.”

Zheng Yan stepped out of the tub and shamelessly ran a hand between his legs, giving himself a few playful tugs. Duan Ling pretended not to see, tossing him the robes and gathering the dirty ones for laundry.

Wu Du returned soon after. The day was sweltering, and Wu Du was drenched in sweat, so he also took the opportunity to wash up in the yard. A

short time later, dressed in snow-white robes just like Zheng Yan's, he joined them in the main hall. Duan Ling shot him a questioning glance, and Wu Du nodded—all the arrangements had been completed.

"So what's our approach?" Wu Du asked.

Duan Ling knew he meant the letter to Han Bin. "I reviewed the city garrison's service records," he began. "We'll send a troop of veterans who were Han Bin's former subordinates, ones who served him under the late emperor—including Sun Ting. Have them take Skychaser to Yubi Pass and convince him to send troops. We'll appeal to old sentiment. Han Bin betrayed the late emperor, but he was compelled by circumstance, not any deeply held grudge. And a great general can be counted on to have some strength in his character."

"Not in Bian Lingbai's case," Wu Du said.

"I doubt Han Bin is the same," Duan Ling replied. "He's defended Yubi Pass for years, and the court has very few criticisms of him whenever he's mentioned. From a strategic standpoint, he can't afford to lose Ye to the Mongols. If the Yuan army crosses the Xun River, his garrison at Yubi Pass will be facing them on two fronts. Surely he's aware of that." He looked up at Wu Du. "What do you think?"

"Let the Mongols come," Wu Du said. "This battle is inevitable. From what I saw during today's inspection, even if the soldiers are a bunch of unruly veterans, they won't lose to the Mongols in a head-on fight. I'd be more worried if they were all new recruits. Neither the former commandant nor the governor knew what to do with them; without a good commander, they couldn't fight effectively. The men are discontented—they have no confidence in their leaders. This is why Ye has had one emergency after another."

"Then we can't afford to alienate them further," Duan Ling said. "We won't have any new recruits to replenish the garrison's numbers until spring. We'll need to plan every step with care."

"If Han Bin lets the Mongols through, Ye will be finished," Wu Du said. "Two thousand men defending one city is far from enough to withstand the entire force of the Yuan army. In that case, we'd have to evacuate everyone to Hejian and combine both cities' forces to fight off the invasion."

“That’s our last resort,” Duan Ling said decisively. “But it won’t come to that.”

Sun Ting departed with the letter for Han Bin that same day, racing at top speed on Skychaser’s back. If all went as planned, Skychaser would reach Yubi Pass within four days.

“Skychaser won’t let me ride him,” Sun Ting had said at first. “I’ll take some extra horses instead and change mounts. I’ll run them into the ground if I have to.”

Duan Ling waved him aside and approached Skychaser. He stroked the horse’s head and whispered into his ear, “Skychaser, take Sun Ting to Yubi Pass to deliver a letter. It will save our lives.”

Duan Ling beckoned Sun Ting over. This time, Skychaser didn’t shy when the soldier tried to mount. He only cast a quizzical glance at Duan Ling, waiting for him to climb up as well.

“Go!” Duan Ling urged. “Hurry there and back!”

With Sun Ting clinging tight to his back, Skychaser tore out of Ye like a gust of wind in the direction of Yubi Pass.

Over the following days, Zheng Yan remained at the governor’s residence while Wu Du was out with the soldiers, planning their battle strategy. The two lieutenants he’d beat up previously were both back on their feet, and accompanied him in running the army through their drills.

Duan Ling watched them drill a few times. As expected of an army his father had led in the past, once the soldiers got serious, they maneuvered with order and discipline, practicing their frontline charge. Their prior experience was clear—these men knew how to survive on the battlefield.

He spent the rest of his time racking his brains over how to bring the two cities through the coming winter. He issued orders prohibiting logging on the nearby mountains as well as burning wood for charcoal, hoping to restore the forests south of the Xun River. Currently, the people still had charcoal to burn from their reserves. But with autumn arriving, a tremendous amount of firewood and charcoal would be needed to warm the city’s homes. If they kept burning through their supplies at their current rate, they would be exhausted long before winter.

Then there was the matter of food. The messenger Duan Ling had dispatched to Liao still had yet to return. If they'd traveled day and night, they should've reached Zhongjing by now.

But if Batu's forces came, Duan Ling still hadn't any clear idea of what to do.

He was facing the biggest challenge of his life. In the past, he'd only needed to survive. Now, he needed to ensure the survival of two cities and all the lives therein.

When he brought his worries to Wu Du, his response was: "Just focus on managing the city. Leading troops into battle is my business. If you worry over everything anyway, what's the point of having me as your commandant?"

But still Duan Ling wasn't reassured.

"Stop fretting," Zheng Yan ultimately advised him.

Since he'd arrived, Duan Ling had enjoyed a different elaborate meal each day. The previous afternoon, he'd been served knife-cut noodles in a rich beef-bone broth topped with braised meat; now, he was eating a salt-fried river shrimp and okra soup. Distracted, Duan Ling sighed over his food.

"This is his first time taking command of an army," Duan Ling said.

"As a leader, you must learn to share your burdens," Zheng Yan replied. "Do you really think Wu Du can't survive a loss? I doubt that. He's lost so many times in the past; he's been ground down to nothing before. It was only after meeting you that he began to rebuild himself."

Duan Ling nodded. Zheng Yan had known Wu Du much longer than he had. If the situation called for it, Duan Ling could lead troops too. But an army could no more have two commanders than a country could have two rulers. Rather than offering unnecessary suggestions, it was better to put his trust fully in Wu Du.

These days, Wu Du returned very late at night. Duan Ling retired to bed first, while Zheng Yan sat in the courtyard, admiring the moon, only taking his leave when Wu Du returned. Wu Du would pad silently into the bedchamber and lie down beside Duan Ling without disturbing his rest.

When Duan Ling opened his eyes again the next morning, Wu Du would already be gone.

Chapter 139

BATU WAS LATE. Ye dispatched ten scouts to survey the surrounding area, who reported several sightings of the Yuan army—but the enemy moved unpredictably, never staying too long in one place. The city garrison was left confused, uncertain when the fighting would begin.

“What are they waiting for?” Duan Ling wondered aloud, his brows wrinkled into a deep furrow as he studied the map.

“The right moment,” Wu Du replied. “And only they know when that will be.”

A thick layer of clouds had rolled in—another storm brewing amid the already humid air. A bad sign, Duan Ling thought as he stood atop the city walls, observing the skies above. Once the storm reached the city, the beacon towers he’d erected between Ye and Hejian would be rendered useless, their signal fires impossible to light in the rain.

Mud would also make marching and fighting treacherous. If the Mongols attacked the city now, things would turn ugly fast.

The wind was picking up speed. The first beacon tower was located nearby, and within the city, militiamen were practicing shooting drills. Wu Du had assigned five company commanders and twenty squad leaders to train all the able-bodied civilian men he could find. While this had added two thousand more soldiers to their number, the new men hadn’t been training for long enough to be of much use. Equipping their own people to fight had the advantage of avoiding internal conflict with any borrowed troops, but Duan Ling didn’t think the militiamen were well-suited for fighting the Mongols. At most, he could assign them to guard the city or posture from high on the walls.

“When do you think they’ll come?” Duan Ling asked.

“Tomorrow is the anniversary of the late emperor’s death,” Zheng Yan said rather than answer the question.

“So it is.” Duan Ling’s thoughts were instantly diverted. “Two years gone before I even realized it. How does His Majesty observe the day?”

“Mourning in the palace. How else?”

Duan Ling nodded. He spotted Wu Du down below, returning to the city with a troop of a hundred soldiers, and shouted down at him. “You went out?”

Wu Du jerked his head up and yelled back, “Get down from there! What are you doing standing on the wall? It’s too high!”

For two nights in a row, Wu Du hadn’t come back, even to sleep. Duan Ling didn’t know where he’d gone—maybe to investigate the Mongols’ movements himself. He descended the wall and ordered the gates to be opened, but Wu Du didn’t enter the city.

“I’ve got everything ready, don’t worry!” he called. “Go back inside—it’s about to rain. I’m going to check the beacons. Off you go.”

Duan Ling hadn’t seen Wu Du in two days and missed him dearly. He ordered a horse of his own to be brought and shot out of the gates after him. “I’ll come with you!”

Wu Du had been ready to tell him to turn back, but on second thought, he raised his voice and said, “Come here.”

As Duan Ling’s horse came up alongside his own, he pulled Duan Ling onto his mount. The pair left Zheng Yan to guard the city while they led their troop of a hundred to inspect the beacon towers.

“Eyes open!” Wu Du yelled up at the soldiers stationed with the beacons. “Stay alert! Rain is coming!”

Stacks of firewood for the beacons were already prepared within the towers. The soldiers hauled the logs under cover to keep them dry. Wu Du and Duan Ling rode down along the line of towers, inspecting six in a row as Duan Ling cast frequent looks at the sky.

“If only we had the Mongols’ falcons,” he lamented. “Even a messenger bird would be nice.”

“Your father told me the Mongols have special fowl shooters who target messenger birds,” Wu Du said. “Are you cold?”

A wild wind had whipped up. Oppressive black clouds loomed low over the vast land. Wu Du shook out a cloak and wrapped it around himself

and Duan Ling; it fluttered in the wind as their warhorse galloped toward the next tower.

“The rain’s almost here,” Duan Ling said. “I hope they won’t pick now to attack.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of even if they do. Don’t worry,” Wu Du said. “Why’d you come out here? Miss me?”

Duan Ling wrapped his arms around Wu Du’s waist under the cloak, pressing their bodies flush. “Do you think we can win?”

“We can’t lose,” Wu Du said. “This is your father’s fief. He’s watching over us.”

The grim clouds overhead continued to thicken, paling with the occasional flash of lightning. Wu Du brought the horse to a halt. “Storm’s here. Let’s head back. I’ll check on the rest tomorrow.”

At the sound of his whistle, the soldiers all turned to head back. Duan Ling couldn’t shake the feeling that Batu would make his move today.

“Report!” A soldier dashed toward them from the direction of Ye. “Lord Sun Ting has returned!”

Duan Ling’s heart leapt into his throat. “Quickly, let’s go!”

They were just shy of forty li from Ye when another soldier came running, crying out, “Report! News from the scouts! Yuan army spotted a hundred li away! Heading toward Ye!”

The enemy had come.

A bolt of lightning pierced the sky. With a resounding crash of thunder, the storm broke in earnest.

“They’re coming!” Duan Ling shouted. “Send word to Hejian!”

Wu Du yanked the cloak higher to cover himself and Duan Ling; his handsome, aloof profile flashed through the flapping hems as they raced through the pouring rain. They arrived at the city walls shrouded in darkness, thunder rumbling and lightning slicing through the clouds above. The final storm of summer had arrived.

“Everyone in position!” Wu Du barked as they galloped through the gates. “Get ready to fight! After this battle, we’ll drive the Mongols back

where they came from!”

Wu Du and several of his subordinates split up to mobilize the troops. Duan Ling watched him issue rapid orders with amazement. He hadn’t realized Wu Du had managed to bring the Ye city garrison soldiers so fully under his command.

“What are you smiling at?” Wu Du asked.

“Nothing,” Duan Ling said. “Are you leaving the city?”

“The army will split up for an ambush tonight. I probably won’t come back until it’s over,” Wu Du said. “Let’s go find Zheng Yan.”

Sun Ting was waiting for them in the governor’s residence. He dropped to one knee the second they stepped inside. “My lord, sir—we did it!”

Duan Ling nearly fainted upon hearing this, catching the edge of the table to hold himself steady against the wave of relief. He found himself stammering from excitement. “Excellent—excellent.”

Sun Ting launched into his report: Upon receiving Sun Ting’s letter, Han Bin had acted just as Duan Ling predicted.

Just as Duan Ling had thought, Batu’s army had dispatched several messenger hawks with his request separately from the runner Zheng Yan had encountered. Ögedei had granted the requested reinforcements. After reading Duan Ling’s letter, Han Bin had deployed his troops without hesitation, ambushing the Mongols outside Yubi Pass. Sun Ting had joined the battle himself, which had simultaneously dealt a devastating blow to Ögedei’s army and blocked their path to Ye. After securing their victory, Sun Ting had raced back to Ye with the news as fast as Skychaser would carry him. As of that moment, Batu likely hadn’t yet received word that the reinforcements they expected wouldn’t be coming.

Or perhaps he already knew—which was why he’d launched an assault in the storm.

“You’ve done well,” Duan Ling said to Sun Ting. “Go and rest now.”

“It was your letter that did it,” Sun Ting told him. “General Han read it and went straight to mobilizing the men without asking a single question.”

Duan Ling nodded, another weight lifting from his shoulders.

“Are we gearing up for battle?” Sun Ting continued, looking to Wu Du. “Let me ride in your vanguard, sir!”

“No.” Wu Du spread open the map. “I need you in the city to provide support.” He turned to Duan Ling next, pointing at the inked terrain. “I’m setting troops here, here, and here to ambush them.”

Zheng Yan chose that moment to arrive, striding into the hall. He took one glance at the map and said, “The storm won’t be over any time soon.”

“I’ve already sent word to Qin Long,” Wu Du said. “Hejian’s forces should be able to reach us by morning at a forced march. I’ll plant ambushes around the perimeter of the city, wait for the Yuan army to arrive, then attack their rear. You stay inside—you don’t need to do anything. The militia will bluff from the top of the walls.”

“Shouldn’t you wait until Qin Long’s reinforcements arrive before launching the ambushes?” Duan Ling asked.

“Can’t pin our hopes on him,” Wu Du said, already turning to march out the door.

Duan Ling chased after him, hurrying into the yard just as another flash of lightning streaked across the sky, brightening the night and throwing their silhouettes across the ground.

“Take Skychaser!” he insisted, stopping in his tracks as he grabbed Wu Du’s hand. Wu Du pulled to a halt as well, his back to Duan Ling. Duan Ling said, quieter, “Be careful.”

Wu Du whirled and bent down, pressing his forehead to Duan Ling’s and capturing his lips. “Wait for me,” he breathed.

Torrential rain poured down, furious, as if determined to douse the flames of war and scour the mortal realm of sin—washing away all hatreds, old and new, to rinse the night clean and welcome a new day.

“The Mongols are coming!”

Dong—dong—dong—!

Alarm bells tolled over the city. Militiamen swarmed the city walls as Wu Du led his army out of the north gate, Skychaser splashing through

puddles. At his whistle, the troops behind him split off into smaller units and sped toward their designated marks to lie in wait.

The commotion outside rose to a crescendo. Duan Ling's breathing quickened where he stood inside the governor's residence. On the night Shangjing had fallen, it had also stormed like this, the rain and thunder crashing in his ears.

Dressed in deep red martial robes, Zheng Yan stood at Duan Ling's back, his hands tucked in his sleeves. He lowered his lashes as he pulled on his glove.

"What should we do?" Duan Ling asked.

"Dunno," Zheng Yan replied. "Wu Du just told me to keep you safe. Do you have an idea?"

"Can we climb up the wall tower to see how things are going?" Duan Ling asked.

"Of course," Zheng Yan said. "What weapon do you use, by the way? I've never seen you fight. Do you even know how to use one?"

Duan Ling changed into casual robes and pinned the sleeves back for ease of shooting. He slung a bow over his back and strapped a longsword to his waist. Amid the booming thunder, the two left the governor's residence, headed for the tower.

The city militia crowded at the base of the wall, bustling about as they prepared for battle. Shouts rang across the throng.

"Bring the fire pit—"

"Where's the oil?"

"The rain's coming down too hard—it won't light!"

"The governor's here! Stand aside!" Zheng Yan barked.

The men milling in Duan Ling's path jumped to either side.

"Where are the archers?" Duan Ling shouted. "Come up with me!"

One company commander hurried down the tower stairs to receive him. "My lord, the wind is too strong! We can't shoot!"

Wu Du had left a hundred archers behind when he took the soldiers out of the city. Currently, they, along with the civilian militia, were the only troops defending the city's walls. The archers formed up at his command and ascended the wall tower.

As Duan Ling mounted the stairs, he was nearly bowled over by the wind—the gales were so strong the rain was lashing sideways.

Watch over me, Dad, Duan Ling prayed.

"Don't!" Zheng Yan shouted. "The wind is blowing toward us. It's too dangerous. You'll be hit by a stray arrow!"

"It's fine," Duan Ling yelled back. "Now, up the tower!"

Given no other choice, Zheng Yan dragged Duan Ling up the stairs.

The wind howled, and amid the ringing of the bells, primal gales—raging through the ages and across the heavens—came roaring in. The dense, dark clouds overhead were forced westward by a furious easterly wind that scoured the world in that singular moment. Like the hand of a god had brushed across the sky, the storm parted as the rain and clouds were driven back.

The instant Duan Ling reached the top of the wall tower, the world brightened. The wild winds had blown through the angry rain—revealing a night sky streaked through with a brilliant silver river of stars.

It was a lull in the storm. Duan Ling called at once, "Light the beacons!"

Hope burned within him.

The bells pealed again. *Dong—dong—dong—!*

From the edge of the plain, the Yuan army flooded toward Ye like the onrushing tide.

As the wind died down, Duan Ling stepped up to the battlement, his robes fluttering in the breeze. Unveiled by the retreating storm, the glittering band of stars stretched above him, and the drenched earth scattered with puddles spread below.

"You're late!" were his first words.

He couldn’t see which of the Yuan soldiers below the city wall was Batu, but he knew he was there.

An order went up from the Mongol ranks. A resounding yell shook the skies amid the clamor of weapons lowering and soldiers stepping back.

A young Mongol general reined his horse to a halt before the great army. Clad head to toe in armor with a spear gripped in his hand, he lifted his helmet to reveal a handsome visage. It was Batu, who had stopped his horse in sight of the city gates.

“I’m always one step too late,” he said. “But maybe not this time.”

A muffled boom erupted from the high platform at the center of the city. A pillar of flames shot into the sky, illuminating everything within a ten-li radius. The beacon’s sudden heat and light caught the Mongols off guard, and the horses of the men at the front shied away.

Batu held his warhorse steady. Out of the entire line, only he took but a single step back.

Countless puddles churned into the mud by the hooves of five thousand warhorses reflected the shining stars above. Where the Milky Way touched the horizon, a searing burst of light kindled to life.

Another beacon sparked in the distance, shining through the night.

One after another, the beacons were lit, a winding heavenly road uncoiling through the dark. This was not the first time the Yuan army had witnessed such a sight—the beacons atop the Great Wall lit up just like this when their two great armies clashed.

The thick clouds that had shrouded the sky receded further, as though a divine hand waved them sweetly aside to make way for the spirit of war—the guardian of this great earth who straddled the shores of life and death—as he advanced toward the battlefield.

Who dares invade my land and threaten my subjects?!

Batu looked over his shoulder and shouted an order to his army. The Yuan soldiers nocked their arrows, set the tips alight, and took aim at the city walls. Stony-faced, Batu called up to Duan Ling on the battlements. “Stand back! I don’t want to kill you by accident!”

But Duan Ling wasn’t the least bit afraid. He too nocked an arrow and leveled it at Batu, yelling back, “You want Ye? You can take it over my cold corpse!”

Furious, Batu barked his next command. Both sides let fly, darkening the skies with their arrows. And then—

“Men, with me!” a voice cried. “*Charge!*”

Ambush forces, led by Wu Du, emerged from the forests ringing the city and charged the Yuan army from the rear.

Duan Ling’s arrow, freed from its string, reflected the black night’s stars and the blazing flames of the beacon behind them, leading the way for the volley of hundreds more loosed by the city’s archers. At the same time, thousands of fiery arrows from the enemy below arced overhead—illuminating the faces of Batu, holding strong before the city gates, and Duan Ling, standing firm atop the city wall.

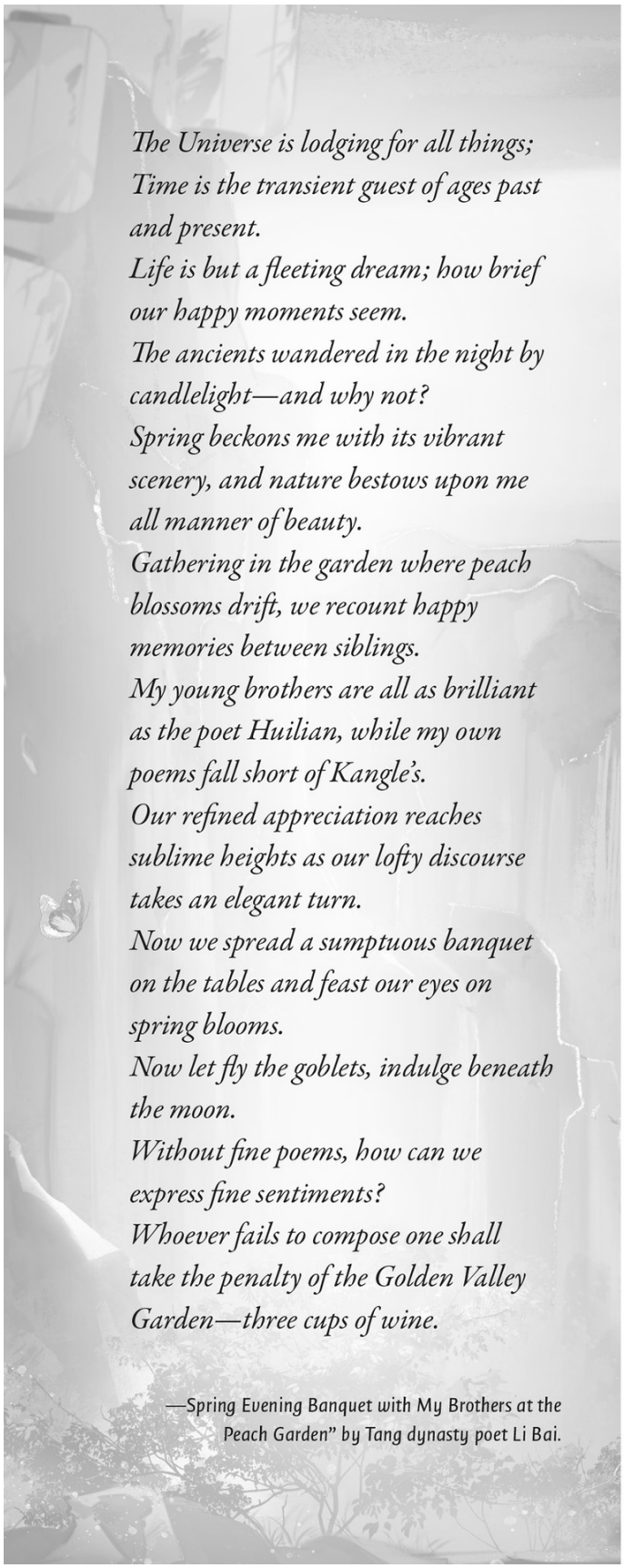
The arrowheads of both sides streaked like a million shooting stars across the night sky, setting it aflame.

On the seventh day of the seventh month, Duan Ling and Batu faced each other across rushing waves. The world seemed to fade into nothingness, leaving only a vast and roaring river between them. That river’s torrents surged with cruel indifference, breaking them apart and stranding them on opposite shores of life, fated never to meet again.

On the seventh day of the seventh month, new hatreds piled onto old, drowning hearts in endless yearning.

On the seventh day of the seventh month, how loathsome was this mortal world—for the partings outnumbered the meetings, and so it was destined to be for all eternity.

Character Guide and Glossary



The Universe is lodging for all things;
Time is the transient guest of ages past and present.
Life is but a fleeting dream; how brief our happy moments seem.
The ancients wandered in the night by candlelight—and why not?
Spring beckons me with its vibrant scenery, and nature bestows upon me all manner of beauty.
Gathering in the garden where peach blossoms drift, we recount happy memories between siblings.
My young brothers are all as brilliant as the poet Huilian, while my own poems fall short of Kangle's.
Our refined appreciation reaches sublime heights as our lofty discourse takes an elegant turn.
Now we spread a sumptuous banquet on the tables and feast our eyes on spring blooms.
Now let fly the goblets, indulge beneath the moon.
Without fine poems, how can we express fine sentiments?
Whoever fails to compose one shall take the penalty of the Golden Valley Garden—three cups of wine.

—Spring Evening Banquet with My Brothers at the Peach Garden" by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

Chapter 140

ON THE SEVENTH DAY of the seventh month, two years after the Battle of Shangjing, war erupted between the kingdoms of Chen and Yuan.

That year, Jiang Prefecture had suffered severe floods, sending refugees fleeing their homes. Between the unrest in the north and the nation's already depleted resources, Southern Chen grappled with both external and internal threats.

No one could have anticipated that the newly appointed governor of Hebei—a young man who had been in office for less than a month—would join forces with the Hejian commandant to engage in a large-scale battle against the Mongols.

The Yuan army failed to seize the city in one night as they'd planned, harried by repeated surprise attacks from ambush troops. By midnight, Wu Du had launched yet another assault on them.

"Charge!"

Ye's garrison troops, two thousand strong, attacked the Yuan army's rear formation on his command.

Without the constant cavalry strikes from behind, Batu almost certainly would've captured Ye. Wu Du seemed determined to avoid a direct confrontation with him, withdrawing immediately after each skirmish. Duan Ling, observing from the walls, noticed that every time the Yuan army tried to regroup and reverse their formation to engage Wu Du, the troops appeared disorganized. Again and again, they missed their chances.

Their army lacked unity. The minghan jurtchis were probably refusing Batu's orders, eager only to capture Ye as quickly as possible. Failure to enforce military order was a fatal flaw in any army. Had Batu not made an enemy of his commanders when he'd kidnapped Duan Ling, the Yuan army might not have been so divided. It was an ironic twist of fate.

Two minghans—units of a thousand men each—approached the city walls. Duan Ling led the militia in defending against their siege towers and

battering rams; when a ram struck the city gate with a thunderous crash, dozens rushed to reinforce it. Duan Ling ran along the battlements trailed by a cluster of archers. Each arrow found its mark, and Yuan soldiers dropped in droves.

Chaos reigned both atop and below the walls. Wu Du fought at the van, leaving a river of blood in his wake. Few could defend against a single strike from his Flashblade—it cleaved through the enemy, parting armor and flesh alike. Above, Duan Ling sagged, panting, against the wall. The Yuan army had realized they couldn't take the city without eliminating the forces attacking from their rear. A unit of around two thousand split off to charge Wu Du's troops, finally committing to countering his relentless strikes.

The assault on the gates immediately eased. The city militia overturned barrels of oil and lit the ready kindling, filling the area with black smoke. Duan Ling spotted a Yuan soldier fleeing through the haze and seized the chance to loose an arrow. Another enemy fell.

Clad in his black armor, Wu Du cut through the darkness like a ghost. As soon as the Yuan troops turned their attention to him, he retreated into the woods. Moments later, flames erupted from the forest, sending thick smoke billowing into the enemy's ranks. While the Yuan soldiers hacked and coughed, Wu Du's forces struck from their flank. Inch by inch, the black-armored general's guerilla tactics were whittling down the Yuan army's numbers.

Batu roared in fury and charged forward himself.

Wu Du swapped his sword to his left hand, his right exhausted from the work of slaughter, and spat, "Perfect timing."

Skychaser surged into the fray. Batu, wielding a heavy black-iron spear, swung his weapon up to meet Wu Du's Flashblade. Metal struck metal with a resounding *clang* as Skychaser rammed Batu's steed.

The impact shattered the spear's haft and sent Batu's horse screaming to the ground. Wu Du wheeled and leaned halfway out of the saddle, Flashblade readied for a second strike. Batu stamped at the muddy ground in rage and drew his saber.

“Up!” he roared at his warhorse, hauling on the reins. The horse frothed bloody from the harsh pull of the bit and struggled back to its feet. Batu swung his saber, the blade ringing along the length of Wu Du’s. Wu Du gave a cry of admiration. He shifted for a counter-slash, but Batu had already spurred his mount away.

Above the field of carnage, the sky grew lighter by degrees. Duan Ling spotted a dark line approaching on the distant horizon, raising clouds of dust.

“Change formation!” Qin Long bellowed.

The reinforcements had arrived from Hejian. They stormed up the hill and shifted into an assault formation as they charged ahead, their vanguard fanning out into a wide line.

“Charge!” Qin Long commanded.

“Withdraw!” shouted Wu Du.

In near perfect concert, Qin Long launched his assault while Wu Du led his troops to retreat. The Yuan army scrambled to meet Qin Long’s charge—too late. Thousands of cavalry clashed in brutal combat, the ground below Ye’s city walls transforming into a slaughterhouse floor.

“The field is yours!” Wu Du shouted to Qin Long, setting his heels to Skychaser’s sides.

Before Duan Ling could order the gates opened to admit Wu Du, the black-armored general and his men streamed past the gates and around the outside of the walls to the west side of the city.

At long last, the Yuan forces collapsed. They didn’t flee in panic, but made an orderly retreat around the city’s eastern wall with Qin Long in pursuit.

“Mount your horses,” Duan Ling commanded the militiamen at his side. “With me!”

As the Yuan army passed the eastern gate, still attempting to regroup, the gates swung open. Duan Ling led a hundred archers and more than a thousand militiamen in a surprise attack, catching the Mongols utterly by surprise. Their formation broke in an instant as they scattered in the face of

the head-on assault. Qin Long's forces overtook them and joined Duan Ling's just as the rallying Yuan army fragmented again.

"Lord Governor!" Zheng Yan shouted, riding after him. "You're too reckless! Get back here and guard the city!"

"Forget that!" Duan Ling shouted back, merging his troops with Qin Long's.

They pursued the Yuan army over ten li as day broke over the city walls.

"Fall back! All units, return to defense!" Qin Long commanded.

Duan Ling had hoped to capture Batu, but with the Yuan army in complete disarray, it was impossible to find him. He had to relent.

Just as they were moving to withdraw, another troop charged into the Yuan army's flank, Wu Du riding at their head. Before the Mongols could register who their new enemy was, they'd been scattered again.

"Wu Du!" Duan Ling called to him.

"What are you doing here?" Wu Du yelled. "Didn't I tell you to stay in the city?!"

"I thought they might attack the east gate," Duan Ling said, trying to explain himself. "Our defense there is too weak."

Only a few dozen soldiers had been left to defend Ye.

Qin Long gave Duan Ling a thumbs-up. "You two have got guts."

"Enough of that," Wu Du said. "Change horses and come with me. Qin Long, you ride with Zheng Yan. We'll outflank them at the Xun River."

The Yuan army's momentum was lost. A violent internal dispute had broken out among the ranks as they thundered toward the Xun River, now their only avenue of escape. Arrows continued to target them from the ambush units Wu Du had stationed in the woods all around. Feeling as though the enemy lurked behind every tree and rock, the Yuan army fled across the water.

Only half their forces had forded the river when Wu Du and Qin Long struck again. This final attack proved devastating to the Yuan forces—at least a thousand soldiers died in the clash, their corpses floating along the

surface of the Xun River. Fewer than two thousand Mongols survived to scramble up on the north bank of the river. Both armies stood facing each other across the water.

“And don’t come back!” Duan Ling yelled from the southern bank. He was splashed in blood, his hand shaking from drawing his bowstring.

“Let’s withdraw,” Wu Du said. “The city’s defenseless; we need to return.”

In the end, Duan Ling never managed to lay eyes on Batu again. The battle drew to a close there on the banks of the Xun.

On their return to the city, wounded soldiers were everywhere. The costs of the battle had been steep.

“Tally the casualties,” Wu Du ordered, striding toward the governor’s residence.

The instant he stepped inside, his knees buckled. He sank heavily to the ground, his armor clanking. Blood seeped from beneath him, though whether it was his own or the enemy’s was impossible to tell. Duan Ling’s robes were in tatters, exposing the Radiant White Tiger armor underneath. He slumped down too, sprawling, utterly spent, over Wu Du’s legs.

Cheers erupted outside.

“Lord Governor, Commandant,” a lieutenant reported. “Ye’s forces count 472 dead and 1,013 wounded. Hejian’s count 36 dead and 601 wounded.”

“So many?” Duan Ling said without opening his eyes. “I’ll personally see to the reparations later. Have to rest now—I’m beat.”

As autumn arrived in Jiang Prefecture, waves of golden wheat lined the official roads.

A messenger raced down the capital’s main avenue. The man had ridden nonstop through the day and night to deliver the word of the city of Ye’s resounding victory against the Yuan army on the night of Qixi. The news shocked the entire court. At the following morning’s assembly, civil and military officials stood equally dumbfounded.

“The Mongols have withdrawn north of the Xun River,” Xie You said. “They likely won’t encroach into our territory again any time soon.”

“They directly engaged the Yuan forces without seeking the permission of the court,” Su Fa, the Minister of Revenue, said. “What if the Mongols returned this winter to take their revenge?”

“Ye is at least two weeks’ fast travel from the capital,” Mu Kuangda said. “A round trip takes a month. His Majesty already issued a secret decree granting discretionary authority to the Hejian commandant when he took office. The Mongols weren’t simply probing—they aimed to take the city. By all measures, this battle was fully justified.”

“Four thousand against five is quite the remarkable victory,” Cai Yan commented.

“Your Highness, this battle cannot be judged by numbers alone,” Xie You said.

Li Yanqiu remained silent, his eyes trained on the map of Hebei spread before him.

Xie You stepped forward and explained to the ministers. “The Yuan army specializes in swift raids, not long sieges. From Yubi Pass to the eastern regions, whenever cities along the border fight the Mongols, they typically defend themselves by closing their gates. In this battle, Hejian Commandant Wu Du planted an ambush and attacked the Yuan army from behind while they were besieging the city. In coordination with his lieutenant Qin Long, his troops outflanked the Mongols and drove them all the way across the Xun River. Though I didn’t witness the battle personally, all this can be gleaned from Governor Wang Shan’s report.”

“This was a favorite tactic of the late emperor,” Li Yanqiu remarked in a mild tone. “During the Battle of Shangjing against Ögedei, he ambushed their rear while they were besieging the city. For this battle, although credit for the victory goes to Wu Du, Wang Shan’s contributions cannot be overlooked. Had he not intercepted the Mongols’ communication and had the presence of mind to alert Han Bin at Yubi Pass so he could intercept their reinforcements, Ye would likely be lost.”

The hall fell quiet.

Cai Yan appeared agitated. Li Yanqiu gazed at him and asked gently, “What do you think, my son?”

“Mm. Let the Ministry of War evaluate their merits,” Cai Yan said.

“Although the Mongols have been driven out of Hebei,” Mu Kuangda said, reentering the discussion, “Ye, Hejian, and the surrounding areas have missed the autumn harvest. Conscripting the militia last month may have saved the city, but it disrupted their farm work. We may need to allocate additional grain to help them through the winter.”

Su Fa sighed. “If more northern refugees flood south, we’ll have no choice but to supply Ye with food.”

“Then let it be so,” Li Yanqiu said, rising to his feet. “Court dismissed.”

The autumn skies stretched wide overhead, northerly winds bending the grass and rippling the wheat fields. With the Mongols defeated, Duan Ling had immediately disbanded the militia for harvest work, lest they miss the whole season. The city was left strangely empty as its people all went out to reap the fields and mill the grain.

For three full days, Duan Ling busied himself compensating bereaved families and visiting the wounded, thoroughly exhausting himself. When he returned to the governor’s residence each night, he changed Wu Du’s dressings in the privacy of their chamber. The arrow wound from before had left a scar, and their recent battle had marked him as well.

“One scar per battle,” Duan Ling said. “In a few years, you’ll be covered in them.”

“I should get a few more,” Wu Du replied. “So when we’re old and you’re the emperor, if you grow tired of me, I’ll just show them off. They’ll remind you how good I’ve been to you.”

“What are you saying?” Duan Ling huffed, amused.

As he gazed at Wu Du, his heart stirred. He wrapped his arms around his waist, leaning against his muscular back and pressing a kiss on the tiger tattoo on his neck.

“I bet that bastard won’t dare come after you again,” Wu Du said.

“He will. Before next summer, he’ll be back.”

Duan Ling knew the cause of Batu’s defeat. It hadn’t been lack of ability, but internal strife among the Yuan army. Next time, he’d come prepared—probably with Amugu ready to duel Wu Du one-on-one, and his own private army from Hulunbuir.

The next several months would be a precious respite.

Once his bandages were refreshed, Wu Du dressed to leave their bedchamber. Duan Ling watched him. “Where are you off to now?”

“Finding a way to get you food.”

Duan Ling grinned. “I’m already on it; that’s *my* duty.”

Wu Du waved him off, already striding out the door. “Can’t help it—I gotta bring home the money.”

“Hey, wait up,” Duan Ling called after him, hurrying to keep pace. “There are a few other things that need tackling. Let’s figure it out together.”

The Mongols were quiescent for the time being, and the shadow squad hadn’t shown itself again since that day—was it because Wu Du had discovered their trail, or because Zheng Yan was here? Feng Duo was no fool; he must have dispatched more than two assassins. It was no doubt counter to his plans that the two prior unfortunate souls had been discovered.

How many more would come, and when they’d strike, remained unknown.

Duan Ling had discussed the issue with Wu Du multiple times. Wu Du believed in meeting threats as they came—they feared the assassins, but Feng Duo surely feared Wu Du and Duan Ling more. So long as they took proper precautions, the shadow squad would have no opportunity, and thus the problem was solved. But Duan Ling’s life had been fraught with unease. Since childhood, he had rarely felt secure anywhere, which had shaped his habit of acting proactively, even when the enemy was unknown. When returning to court via his original methods had begun to seem impossible, he’d sought alternatives, like the imperial exams. Now, he wanted to fight

the Mongols and eliminate the assassins. It would ease his mind, at least, to be doing something.

“You resemble the late emperor a lot in this regard,” Wu Du remarked.

“Really?” Duan Ling asked, scratching his head.

Ye’s defensive strategy in their last battle had been devised entirely by Wu Du; Duan Ling hadn’t contributed much, honestly. But perhaps they each instinctively understood the other, and that had influenced Wu Du.

“It was when you sent word to Han Bin to intercept the Mongol reinforcements that I realized we needed to take the initiative,” Wu Du said.

As they chatted, they arrived at the paddock. Wu Du patted Skychaser and said to Duan Ling, “Get on—let’s go have some fun.”

Chapter 141

THE ONLY CREATURE in the world that could provide Duan Ling with a sense of security, aside from Wu Du, was Skychaser. Whenever Wu Du rode into battle, Duan Ling's only thought was that Skychaser would surely keep him safe. He was beginning to understand the significance of a warhorse to a renowned general—though Wu Du still had some distance to go before he earned that title in truth. Duan Ling often thought about stealing another horse so the two of them wouldn't be riding on Skychaser together all the time. He couldn't help but think Skychaser would grow exhausted. The poor warhorse still hadn't had a wife despite his age; Duan Ling felt bad for him, first following his father for so many years and now risking himself again for Wu Du.

"Let's give him a rest," Duan Ling said. "He's eating."

Duan Ling stroked Skychaser's neck, watching him graze, and the horse nuzzled into his touch. Interrupting a horse's meal was a heinous crime, so Duan Ling and Wu Du took to the city on foot.

Now deeper into autumn, the air had a crisp snap to it. Almost half a month had passed since the battle, and most of the more lightly wounded soldiers had recovered.

"Where's Zheng Yan gone?" Duan Ling asked.

"North for a few days, still looking for the Guardian of the Realm," Wu Du said. "We should take a stroll northward ourselves sometime. How much food are we short for the winter?"

"Four hundred thousand catties of grain," Duan Ling replied. "Ye hasn't had a surplus in years. But food isn't our biggest problem—we still don't have enough firewood. Once winter comes, people will freeze to death."

"Maybe we should just let them cut down the trees," Wu Du said.

"If it comes to that, we'll have to," Duan Ling said. "But if we clear-cut the mountains, then the rains will wash away the good soil, and we can't

cultivate terrace fields for more grain. We'll make it through the winter, but we'll starve next year."

Once upon a time, the fertile land of the Central Plains had stretched for thousands of li—but after years of war, what had fallen into Duan Ling's hands was a mess.

Duan Ling and Wu Du exited the city and struck out for the southern bank of the Xun River, where activity had significantly increased. Every household was rushing to get the harvest in, followed by threshing and milling the grain.

"We don't have enough mules," Wu Du said. "Should we raid Liao for some?"

Duan Ling laughed. "I'm trying to beg grain from Zongzhen, and you want to turn around and steal from him? What kind of logic is that?"

As far as Wu Du was concerned, both Liao and Yuan were nations of butchers with blood on their hands. Duan Ling had been too young to witness the tragedy of the Battle of Shangzi, and so he didn't feel the same depth of hatred. His time spent studying in Shangjing had left him with a fondness for the Liao imperial family—particularly Yelü Dashi and Zongzhen's faction.

Meanwhile, the Mongols, in whose attack his father had died, he considered his sworn enemies.

Duan Ling sat on a haystack, hugging his knees and reclining against Wu Du's shoulder as a gentle breeze blew past. Wu Du wrapped an arm around him, a stalk of grass dangling from his lips. They gazed across the river to the north bank of the Xun.

Beyond lay Liao territory.

"If I were Yelü Zongzhen, I'd think twice before lending you grain," Wu Du said.

Duan Ling knew Wu Du was only teasing him—and with a note of jealousy in his voice at that. He had to laugh. "True. I guess if he doesn't, we'll have to starve."

"So let's raid them instead," Wu Du said. "*We'll* do the pillaging this time."

Sometimes Duan Ling truly didn’t know what to do with this man. The instant he was away from Jiang Prefecture, he set about marking his territory like a wild dog. Aside from the fact that an imperially appointed commandant personally leading his troops to pillage border settlements would make him the laughingstock of the three empires, the Ye city garrison wasn’t a pack of barbarians—burning Liao villages and slaughtering women and children was unthinkable.

Duan Ling gazed at the opposite bank and quirked his eyebrows. “I have an idea.”

The same autumn skies stretched over the imperial capital. A child’s kite, trailing a broken string, fluttered into the imperial garden and landed just outside the walls of the Eastern Palace. Cai Yan strode over it, crushing the toy without a backward glance as he hurried inside.

“Leave us,” he said coldly.

The attendants withdrew.

Behind him, Lang Junxia spotted the trampled kite on the ground and bent to retrieve it. He examined the frayed string. “If you let the string out too far, it’ll snap.”

It was rare for Lang Junxia to speak first to Cai Yan; this was the first time in nearly a month. Cai Yan whipped his head around, eyeing him with suspicion.

“I’ve just come from the imperial study,” Lang Junxia explained.

“What are they saying about me?” Cai Yan asked. He exhaled a long breath, closing his eyes.

“That the crown prince is diligent in governance,” Lang Junxia said. “A blessing to the people.”

“Who said that?”

“Prime Minister Mu.”

Cai Yan opened his eyes again, his brow furrowing deeply. “Mu Kuangda has never once praised me in front of His Majesty since my return to court.”

“Mm,” Lang Junxia hummed, nodding.

It would appear Cai Yan wasn’t entirely stupid. Mu Kuangda weighed every word carefully. Was this a reconciliation, or a threat?

Cai Yan had no time to deal with Mu Kuangda now. “Summon Feng Duo. I need to speak with him.”

Lang Junxia went to pass down the order. Feng Duo arrived moments later, looking nervous. He seemed to have something on his mind but held his tongue, waiting for Cai Yan to speak first.

“More news about Wang Shan has reached the capital, this time from Zhongjing,” Cai Yan said. “The Liao Empire has agreed to lend twenty thousand dan of grain to Ye—they even sent a letter to the court directly.”

“What does it say?” Feng Duo asked.

Agitated, Cai Yan frowned and thought for a moment before replying. “Nothing much. I met Yelü Zongzhen once when I was in Shangjing. He only asked me to write a letter back as a guarantee for the loan.”

Feng Duo smiled. “Then this is good fortune Your Highness accumulated in Shangjing on behalf of our people.”

“What exactly are your men doing?” Cai Yan said, suddenly changing the topic as he stepped closer to Feng Duo.

Feng Duo was caught off guard by the sharpness of the question, but he quickly composed himself. Without a glance at Lang Junxia, he bowed his head and replied respectfully, “Of the three teams we dispatched, we’ve lost contact with one. The other two are still lying in wait outside Ye. Two scouts from one of these teams were discovered and eliminated by Wu Du.”

“You alerted the enemy,” Cai Yan said, his tone frigid.

“This subject deserves death for his mistake,” Feng Duo said. “But we still have thirty men in place. All they lack is the right moment to strike.”

“Was the missing team also killed by Wu Du?” Cai Yan asked bluntly, uncaring of Lang Junxia listening in.

“My guess is Zheng Yan,” Feng Duo answered. “As you may recall, he left the capital claiming to be returning to Huaiyin, but he’s been gone a

long time now.”

“That must be it, then.” Cai Yan’s frown deepened. “But what led you to suspect him? Indeed who in the world, outside those four, could quietly kill an entire shadow squad team—but why would he stick his nose in this business? What’s he doing in Hebei? Last month, you told me he was going back home! What on earth is going on? Feng Duo! Explain!”

By the end, Cai Yan’s voice had risen to an enraged shout. Feng Duo took half a step back and dropped to his knees.

“My fourth uncle must know…” Cai Yan said. “He knows I sent assassins after Wang Shan, doesn’t he? Otherwise, why would he send Zheng Yan?!”

“His Majesty doesn’t know that yet,” Feng Duo stated as calmly as he could.

Cai Yan fell silent. He turned to stare at Lang Junxia, still holding the kite with its broken string. “You go,” Cai Yan said, his voice trembling.

Lang Junxia looked back at him in silence.

“Go,” Cai Yan pleaded, desperation in his gaze.

Before he could beg, Lang Junxia set down the kite and replied, “If you killed him, can you still protect your country?”

“Yes,” Cai Yan said. “I’ll write the letter to Yelü Zongzhen right now.”

Lang Junxia turned to leave.

“Kill Wu Du too, if you can,” Cai Yan added.

“I can’t,” Lang Junxia said over his shoulder. “I lost a finger—I can’t wield a sword like before. Wu Du has surpassed me in skill over the last year. I doubt anyone can kill him now.”

These words left Cai Yan speechless.

Only after Lang Junxia’s footsteps had faded into the distance did he at last turn his attention back to Feng Duo. “Rise. Come here.”

Feng Duo stood slowly, then came to kneel by the desk.

With shaking hands, Cai Yan smoothed out Yelü Zongzhen's personal letter. Forcing himself to calm, he said, "I'll dictate. You write."

Feng Du dipped his brush in ink.

"Yelü-xiong…" Cai Yan began. But before Feng Duo's brush touched paper, he corrected himself, "No, write 'Zongzhen.'"

Haltingly, he continued, "Since we parted that year…I haven't heard how you've fared…" Feng Duo's brush moved over the paper as Cai Yan quieted again. A long while passed. Cai Yan said wearily, "My head hurts. I need to rest."

Feng Duo hurriedly assisted him to bed. Cai Yan sighed, then rolled onto his side to face the wall. Feng Duo didn't dare to speak and made to withdraw in silence.

"Feng Duo," Cai Yan's voice rang out. "Don't go. Stay here."

In the ensuing stillness, the only sound in the room was Cai Yan's breathing. Feng Duo sat at the desk, saying nothing, as Cai Yan gradually drifted off to sleep.

Mu Kuangda strode down the corridor, his brows drawn low in a furrow. Changliu-jun followed a few steps behind. Periodically, the prime minister paused in his step, as if to turn and issue an order—then hesitated and kept walking ahead. Changliu-jun moved haltingly along with him.

"Zheng Yan went to Ye," Mu Kuangda said at long last. "What does that mean?"

Changliu-jun remained silent.

"Wuluohou Mu is leaving as well," Mu Kuangda continued. "What does *that* mean?"

Changliu-jun hummed vaguely.

"Nearly fifty shadow squad members were dispatched to Ye. Why are so many people suddenly running north? Tell me." Met with silence once again, Mu Kuangda added, "And as soon as Chang Pin left Xunyang, all news of him ceased. Has information leaked to the Eastern Palace?"

“Although Mister Chang Pin lacks martial power, he’s a smart man. He wouldn’t easily fall prey to the shadow squad,” Changliu-jun replied at last.

“Perhaps not,” Mu Kuangda agreed. “Nonetheless, I worry. Shortly after Chang Pin’s departure, half the shadow squad was dispatched. Zheng Yan claimed to have gone home to Huaiyin, when in reality he went to Hebei.”

“Does this mean—Wu Du and Wang Shan…” Changliu-jun trailed off.

“Wu Du and Wang Shan have nothing to do with this,” Mu Kuangda said. “The shadow squad hasn’t returned, which means they haven’t found Chang Pin yet, but now Wuluohou Mu has gone as well. What game are His Majesty and the crown prince playing?”

Mu Kuangda paced the corridor for another few moments, then stopped again. “I tested him today,” Mu Kuangda said. “He only smiled and didn’t answer.”

“Wang Shan just won a battle,” Changliu-jun said. “He shouldn’t be busy. Why not have him—”

“No,” Mu Kuangda said. “You’ll go.”

Changliu-jun hesitated. “I…”

“Don’t worry,” Mu Kuangda said. “We’ll take a gamble. Plan for a month’s absence; I’ll take the appropriate precautions. Leave tonight. When you reach Ye, locate Wang Shan—but don’t tell him why you’re there. Just say you’re looking for Mister Chang Pin and need Wu Du’s assistance.”

“Understood.”

“Go now,” Mu Kuangda said. “And don’t return until you’ve found Chang Pin.”

Changliu-jun bowed and left swiftly.

“Heh. How interesting,” Mu Kuangda muttered to himself. “All Four Great Assassins gathering in one place.”

He shook his head, unable to shake his unease, and walked away.

Chapter 142

BELOW THE GREAT WALL, wind rippled through a sea of grass. Thick smoke billowed from a distant village, carried by the same wind; the village had been reduced to ash, burned to the ground by Yuan troops. After the Han people living there had been slaughtered, their corpses had been dragged into the fields to rot.

For some time, the village had been a Han village. When the Liao Empire had annexed this region south of the Great Wall, there had been a shift in hierarchy here: The Khitan ranked first, the Semu and the Mongols second, the Tanguts third, and the Han last. After Chen's influence retreated southward, the rule of Liao extended over the village, yet little had changed for the people besides this. They merely owed loyalty to a new ruler they would never see; the only tangible difference was that the tax collectors were now Khitan.

Eventually, even the tax collectors grew lazy and delegated their task to the village heads.

This state of affairs lasted until the day the Mongols came, when the village's name was henceforth erased from history—leaving only ruins behind. The Yuan soldiers killed all the able-bodied men first before raping the women by the field ridges. Once they were satisfied, they slit their throats as well. Several jurtchi stood along the edges of the wheat fields, shooting any remaining villagers who fled there. Packs of hunting dogs were unleashed to run them down, returning with their mouths full of bloody hunks of flesh ripped from dying limbs.

Batu strolled past. He hefted the saber in his hand and hacked at a poplar tree, embedding the blade in the trunk. He yanked it out and struck again. Within a few swings, he'd carved the character for mountain—*shan*—into the tree.

Ling, the voice of a young Duan Ling whispered in his memories.

During their childhood at the academy, Duan Ling had once taken a rock and taught Batu how to write his name on a tree trunk.

“The characters ‘mountain’ and ‘leader’ joined together makes ‘Ling.’ It means ‘leader of a great mountain.’ Han names are logograms.” Duan Ling’s voice seemed to echo in his ears. “What does Batu mean?”

“Nothing.” Back then, Batu had grimaced in annoyance. “Only Han names sound good. My name sounds like a pig or a dog.”

Duan Ling had tugged at his shirt, urging him to write it anyway. Batu had scrawled something in crooked Mongol script, which looked like squirming earthworms.

Duan Ling had tilted his head. “Is this it?”

“You can’t read it?” Batu had taunted.

Duan Ling had shot him a look. “Baghatur.”

“You know what it means?”

Now Batu was shocked. Duan Ling had given him a small smile and walked away.

Batu had chased after him. “Who told you?”

“I read it in a book,” Duan Ling had replied. “Baghatur is the legendary god who moves mountains. He possesses great strength and courage.”

Batu caught up to him, hoisting Duan Ling onto his shoulders and laughing heartily when the other boy screamed. He tossed him back and forth until they both tumbled into the grass. Duan Ling had scrambled up and tried to run, but Batu caught him and threw him down in the dirt again.

Back then, Batu had been filthy all the time, his sheepskin robe washed only twice a year. In contrast, Duan Ling’s clothes had always been freshly laundered, his skin fair, his lips rosy—as clean as the clouds in the sky.

“You’re so goddamn pretty,” Batu had said, staring at Duan Ling. He’d reached out to pinch his cheeks and pat his face.

They’d still been children, then. Duan Ling had been clueless, unaware of the primal urges stirring in Batu—but Batu’s blood was already running hot with desire, a wild hunger raging inside him.

“Let go of me!” Duan Ling had protested. “Or I won’t be friends with you anymore!”

Batu had pinned him down, laying his full weight down on him and burying his face in Duan Ling’s neck to bite him. Duan Ling had bitten down on Batu’s ear in retaliation, making him howl in pain and using the chance to break free.

He’d fled, and Batu had chased him down the corridors until he’d lost him. Eventually he’d found Duan Ling studying, seated before the headmaster, and had to give up. Everyone else had scorned his filthy clothes and face; even the headmaster often made him stand outside as punishment when he happened to clap eyes on him. Batu had waited outside the classroom door like a guard, watching Duan Ling studying and writing.

Sometimes, he’d accepted his punishments willingly.

In the present, Batu settled by the razed village’s well, wiping his neck with a damp cloth from the well bucket. He studied his reflection in the water—his strong, mature features, his indigo eyes. He couldn’t help but remember those fragments of the past. Memories shifted and merged until, years later, Batu could no longer distinguish what had happened in fact from his own imagination.

The one thing he remembered clearly was Duan Ling’s silhouette bathed in the glow of the setting sun as he knelt primly before his desk, studying and writing while Batu stood outside in punishment.

From dusk to dark, when the lanterns were lit; until the stars rose in the night sky.

The days he had most looked forward to during his schooling were naturally their days off on the first and fifteenth of each month. Every time they arrived, Batu always hoped Lang Junxia wouldn’t come. If he didn’t, then Duan Ling would stay in the library with him. At night they would dry their clothes by the fire, and Duan Ling would crawl into Batu’s bed.

When they were still children, Duan Ling’s skin had been comfortably dry, and rubbing against it had sent hot blood coursing through Batu’s veins—but he’d never dared act on his desires, afraid Duan Ling would get angry and ignore him for months after. He’d hoped, in a vague

though pressing way, that Duan Ling would bite him again, as if the gesture carried some particular weight.

When they'd finally reunited, Batu had grown up and was no longer a child. But unlike the young man in his imagination, Duan Ling seemed to be growing in a different direction. The surprising divergence had triggered a passion in him that only amplified his madness.

The people of the steppes said a man's prime was sixteen, the age where he rode free and unrestrained. Such vibrant vitality, like the dazzling green meadows of spring as they gave way to summer, infused even his speech with a sizzling energy. He shouldn't have hesitated back then.

The longer he dwelled on it, the hotter Batu's blood boiled. Desire swelled inside him, threatening to burst, but he had no outlet. When he heard the pained cries of a young man echoing from one of the nearby houses, he couldn't sit still any longer and kicked the door open. Inside, a Yuan soldier was holding a young man down. Batu grabbed the soldier by the hair, dragged him outside, and slammed the door. Without a word, he began to strip.

The boy on the crumbling bed in the dim room was scared out of his wits. He panted for breath, not daring to look at Batu.

Batu tore off his outer robes to expose his muscular chest. His shoulders and back were sculpted with raw strength, his waist tapering down toward an impressive erection, thick and ramrod straight. When he pinned the boy down, the toned contours of his lower back thrummed with power like a wild wolf's. The boy was stunned into silence, only to start screaming wildly as he snapped out of his stupor.

Batu studied the boy's eyes, and within mere moments, he lost interest. He didn't take the boy as he'd intended, instead dragging him off the bed and kicking him into the corner.

Trembling, the Han boy gathered up his torn clothes and dressed himself before kneeling at Batu's feet.

"Got any wine?" Batu asked in the Han tongue.

The boy scrambled to locate some. When he came upon his older brother's dead body in the backyard, he wailed in despair.

Seconds later, he charged back inside with a sickle, ready to die fighting. Batu sighed, his brows knitting. He easily caught the boy's wrist and twisted him down onto the ground. Once again, the boy's resistance sparked a familiar feeling in him. Batu tore at his clothes, and this time, the boy fought back. The harder he thrashed, the more excited Batu became—but after barely any time at all, the boy's head lolled, and he stilled.

In the midst of the struggle, he had turned the sickle on his own chest and sunk down until the blade impaled his heart.

Batu watched blankly as the boy's blood pooled on the floor. He lowered the body to the ground with another sigh, then wrapped himself in his robes and sat on the bed.

Outside, the light slowly dimmed. He rummaged for some wine and sat back on the bed, leaning against the wall as he drank. Once the last drop was drunk, all that was left was darkness. Reclining against the wall, half drunk, he drifted through a kaleidoscope of fragmented memories of himself and Duan Ling tussling in their childhood. The myriad colors of his recollection, along with Duan Ling's bright and clear voice, illuminated what should've been a dim and dull life—brightening his whole world.

Life is but a fleeting dream; how brief our happy moments seem—perhaps it would be a form of happiness, too, if he never woke from this grand dream.

Batu didn't know how long he slept before voices outside roused him.

"He's in there," came a familiar voice.

Head throbbing, Batu stumbled out of the house with the wine jar dangling from his fingers and his robes loose. A hand grabbed his arm.

"Chaghan is looking for you. News has come from Guanshan."

Batu tied his robes. "Why are you here?"

The newcomer was none other than Amugu. "You failed to capture Ye, and now the Töregene clan is scheming against you before Ögedei. Tolui sent me to check on you."

They walked out of the abandoned house together, speaking the Han language to thwart eavesdroppers. Batu's head was pounding.

"Where are my troops?" he asked.

“You’ll have to figure that out for yourself,” Amugu said. “Chagatai won’t return them to you. They want you to pay for the two defeats in Hebei. Next time it won’t be Chagatai who comes, but Tolui himself.”

Batu swore. His father Kuchi was the eldest son, while Chagatai was his second uncle, Ögedei was his third, and Tolui his fourth. Tolui valued Batu most out of all his uncles, but Chagatai had never gotten along with Kuchi.

“Hebei is my territory,” Batu said. “I just haven’t conquered it yet. I’ll write to Father and tell him to return my troops.”

“Your father is not well,” Amugu said.

“Oh?” Batu replied. “You’re not here to announce his death, are you?”

Amugu kept silent. They arrived at the door of another courtyard house, where Amugu gestured for Batu to enter.

“I can’t beat that Wu Du,” Batu said as he stepped inside. “I need to train more. How’d you fare against him?”

“A draw at best,” Amugu replied.

“Teach me later.” Batu lifted the door curtain and strode into the inner yard, where the envoy Ögedei had sent waited—a Shiwei man by the name of Chaghan. Beside him were the army inspector and four minghan jurtchis. Their conversation ground to a halt when Batu appeared.

“Borjigin Batu,” Chaghan said. “Your father was wounded by an arrow when he attacked the Merkit tribe. He’s dying. Ögedei sent me to ask you when you will take Hebei. If you can’t do it, you’re to return to Guanshan to face punishment. Everyone is waiting for news from you.”

Batu’s brows drew together slightly.

It was early morning when Wu Du finished his boxing practice and entered the main hall to find Duan Ling alone and unattended, studying a map of Hebei.

With a frown, Wu Du asked, “Where’s Zheng Yan?”

How could Duan Ling be left alone—what if an assassin came?

“Someone came looking for him earlier, so he went out to have fun,” Duan Ling replied. He took in Wu Du’s irritated expression and added, grinning, “It was a youth, sixteen or seventeen. A company commander’s son.”

“Tell him to cut it out with that stuff,” Wu Du said, his frown deepening. “What are we supposed to say when his dad comes looking for him?”

“The young man was entirely willing. Who am I to stop him?” Duan Ling replied.

Wu Du scratched his head. “So he took off before making breakfast?”

“Yeah,” Duan Ling said, laughing.

Huffing, Wu Du headed for the kitchen to see to their food. He beckoned Duan Ling along—he couldn’t be at ease unless Duan Ling was within his sight at all times. In the kitchen, Wu Du washed his hands and set about preparing congee.

Duan Ling began, “I was planning on going out—”

“Where?!” Wu Du nearly toppled a stack of bowls as he whirled around and exclaimed, “Are you trying to get yourself killed, going out alone?!”

“We’ll go together,” Duan Ling said, bewildered.

“Oh.” Realizing Duan Ling had of course meant he would go as well, Wu Du relaxed, giving up his interrogation. “Yeah, sure.”

Exasperated, Duan Ling leaned against the doorframe, a hand pressed to his brow.

“When are we leaving?” Wu Du asked.

“After the messenger we sent to Liao returns,” Duan Ling said. “We’ll take four hundred men. We’ve got a job to do before coming back.”

“Four hundred men? To where?” Wu Du asked.

“Xunyang,” Duan Ling said. “We’ll cross the Xun River and head north into Heishan Valley outside Runan.”

“Okay,” Wu Du agreed. “You want to go back for a look?”

Duan Ling shook his head in silence.

“If you really want to go, we could leave today. No need to wait for the messenger.”

“No,” Duan Ling said. “We’ll wait. I at least want to know if the loan of grain has been approved.”

Chapter 143

THEIR BREAKFAST now ready, Wu Du carried the food out to the main hall for their meal.

Yet to their surprise, they found the hall occupied by someone leisurely sipping a cup of tea: Fei Hongde, long absent and travel weary. It seemed the residence staff had searched for Governor Wang everywhere except the kitchen to properly announce their guest. Thus, not until Wu Du finished cooking did they come face-to-face.

Duan Ling stopped in his tracks, stunned by the sight of him.

Fei Hongde smiled and nodded at Duan Ling. They were old acquaintances now; Fei Hongde didn't bother rising to his feet. "I thought if I hurried, I might just make it in time to cadge a meal."

His arrival was so sudden Duan Ling replied on reflex, "Perfect timing, Mister Fei. Please join us for breakfast."

Wu Du was struck entirely speechless.

Fei Hongde rose with a chuckle. "Greetings, my lord."

"Mister Fei!" Duan Ling cried in delight, coming to his senses.

One Fei Hongde was more valuable to him than an army of thousands. His arrival was surely the work of divine aid. Duan Ling had assumed Fei Hongde would send someone with the grain at the absolute most, or perhaps just a letter in reply, but the man had actually come in person. Overjoyed, Duan Ling rushed to take his hand and invited him to sit. He knelt in front of the table and bowed respectfully. He was so happy he couldn't find the words to say.

Fei Hongde's mouth quirked in amusement. "When I first met you last year, you seemed like a child. Now, you still do."

Duan Ling was as thrilled as he'd been the night Wu Du had cartwheeled through the peach grove—so excited he was ready to go run laps outside in the yard. But at Fei Hongde's comment, his cheeks colored, and he struggled to compose himself.

“Why have you come personally, Mister Fei?” Wu Du asked, cupping his hands politely in greeting.

At last everyone found their seats. Wu Du ordered another bowl of congee to be served for Fei Hongde.

“After being in Liao for so long, I missed the food of the Central Plains,” Fei Hongde said. “I could never get used to theirs; my stomach couldn’t adjust. Southern fare is much more comforting.”

Duan Ling grinned.

“Please, eat,” Fei Hongde bade them. “Don’t mind this old man.”

As he picked up his spoon, Duan Ling thought, *If you’re willing to stay, even if Zheng Yan can’t be persuaded to do so, I’d personally cook for you every day.*

“This congee is delicious,” Fei Hongde said with a smile after his first sip.

“Zheng Yan taught me,” Wu Du said. “He said learning how to cook begins with congee.”

“Indeed.” Fei Hongde shot a glance at Duan Ling. “Mastering the heat and timing is the hardest part—too much or too little ruins the pot.”

“Mm.”

Duan Ling had grown used to straightforward conversations after months in Ye. Now it felt like he was back in front of his teacher, the prime minister—a man who loved speaking in riddles. It took him a moment to register Fei Hongde’s subtle advice: Everything required proper timing.

“I still have much to learn,” Duan Ling said. “I am only worried that time won’t wait on us.”

“Mm…” Fei Hongde seemed contemplative, but he didn’t ask what Duan Ling had meant by *time won’t wait*. This statement carried its own implications and concerns. Instead, Fei Hongde asked, “How has His Majesty’s health been of late?”

“He was doing well when I left the capital,” Duan Ling replied.

He didn’t press on the matter of the grain loan. Since Fei Hongde had come, there was no doubt that the food problem would be solved; even if

the loan hadn’t been secured, this man would have a way. Knowing Fei Hongde, the most important matter was in fact the first topic he raised after sitting down—most important for them, for Ye, and for the entirety of Southern Chen.

“How long is your term here?” Fei Hongde asked.

“Technically three years, but I doubt I’ll stay that long,” Duan Ling replied. Once Ye was fully set to rights, he’d be needed in the capital.

“Just as well,” Fei Hongde said. “It seems we’ll both be idle for the next little while. Let’s take our time to think things through properly.”

The discussion ended there. Duan Ling knew the way in which he returned to court was a critical matter, and Fei Hongde hadn’t made any decisions on that front yet either—but after their parting at Tong Pass, Fei Hongde must have continued pondering the issue as well.

“What has the Liao court decided?” Wu Du asked.

“Mission accomplished,” Fei Hongde replied, smiling.

Flooded with relief, Duan Ling rose to bow to Fei Hongde, who demurred with haste. He untied his bag and continued, “After the prince of Western Liang, Helian Bo, returned to his homeland, he wrote to Yelü Zongzhen about your chance meeting at Tong Pass. With a sweep of his brush, His Majesty Yelü approved the allocation of grain.”

Thank heavens, Duan Ling thought.

“There’s a personal letter for you as well,” Fei Hongde said, fishing it out, “inviting you to visit Liao next spring if you have the time.”

Duan Ling was silent. He accepted the letter but didn’t open it, setting it on the table.

“He’s got it all figured out, has he?” Wu Du remarked.

“His Majesty Yelü would have lent the grain regardless,” Fei Hongde said. “After all, though Chen and Liao have warred in the past, the threat of the Mongols has made them brothers who must rely on each other. Commandant Wu, forgive this old man for being blunt, but some grudges are best let go—at least for now.”

Wu Du said nothing. To him, the Khitan were responsible for his shifu and shiniang's deaths in Shangzi. Although Xunchun had died in Shangjing at the hands of the Mongols, why should she have been there, if not for the first tragedy of their teachers' passing?

"Did His Majesty say anything else?" Duan Ling asked.

"He was very surprised to receive your letter," Fei Hongde said. "His Majesty Yelü said that, after reading Prince Helian's letter, he didn't sleep all night."

"I see." Yelü Zongzhen must've pieced a few things together. Between his two old friends, only Batu knew Duan Ling's true identity. Helian Bo still had no idea he was the crown prince of Southern Chen, and would therefore only have told Zongzhen that he currently went by the name Wang Shan.

How Yelü Zongzhen had deduced the truth, and whether or not he'd taken other measures to probe the court of Southern Chen, Duan Ling couldn't be sure.

"There's also this box," Fei Hongde said, pulling a wooden case from his bag and handing it to Duan Ling.

Duan Ling glanced at Wu Du, who opened it on his behalf. At the sight of the items inside, he was struck speechless again.

"What's this supposed to mean?" Duan Ling asked, studying the contents. He'd expected the long case might hold a sword, but it wasn't so: Eleven peaches of varying sizes lay nestled on the velvet.

"He said you'd understand when you saw it," Fei Hongde said.

"Peaches?" Duan Ling's lips twitched. The word for *peach*, tao, sounded the same as *escape*—was this a hint for him to flee as soon as possible?

"Did you give him some token of love before?" Wu Du asked.

Duan Ling was briefly speechless. He hastily protested, "I did not!"

Wu Du had grown used to this brat's habit of flirting wherever he went—but what could he do? After all, these events had happened years before Duan Ling had even met him; the Liao emperor had known Duan Ling longer than he had.

Fei Hongde merely smiled. “The grain will arrive within a few days. I’m not as spry as you youngsters; a few days on the road has worn me out.”

Duan Ling called for an attendant and ordered, “Have Mister Fei settled in for some rest at once.”

With Fei Hongde’s accommodations arranged, Duan Ling returned his attention to the case of peaches. Wu Du didn’t pry, leaving him alone with his thoughts as he strolled outside the hall.

“They aren’t edible,” Wu Du called back inside. “They’re green and small. He’s probably trying to tease you with these first-year fruits. You can plant them though.”

Suddenly, Duan Ling remembered—the courtyard where he and his father had lived in Shangjing had held a singular peach tree. Lang Junxia used to tell him his father would return when the peach blossoms bloomed. And on that fateful day, when Yelü Zongzhen had invited Duan Ling to join him in Zhongjing, Duan Ling had declined and sent back a token of friendship: a branch of green peaches.

Had Yelü Zongzhen planted the peach pits in his imperial garden—and had they grown into fruiting trees?

Duan Ling stood amazed as he connected the dots. That had to be the message. The peach tree in Zhongjing had grown—two years had passed in the blink of an eye. Perhaps Yelü Zongzhen had guessed everything.

He returned to the table and opened the letter. Written in Khitan script, it addressed him as *Duan Ling.* After the circumstances of their parting, it explained, Yelü Zongzhen had been greatly relieved to hear from Helian Bo last year that he was well. Now it seemed Duan Ling was more adrift than Mister Fei, and resisting the Yuan army was surely a bitter task. But Yelü Zongzhen had never forgotten how Duan Ling had saved his life in Shangjing. The grain had been dispatched, and he hoped—believed—that Duan Ling would survive the Mongols’ assault. His only fear was that Duan Ling might hesitate out of old affections when faced with Batu’s army.

He’s already come and gone, Duan Ling thought.

The letter recalled to him the old days in Shangjing, and he missed them terribly. Zongzhen added that he was deeply anguished to hear of Duan Ling’s father’s passing, and that vengeance would surely come one day. Duan Ling was uneasy about this for a brief moment before he realized Helian Bo must’ve told him.

At the end of the letter, Zongzhen mentioned the peaches in the case. They had indeed come from the branch Duan Ling had sent after their parting in Shangjing, evoking the verse *Bountiful peach blossoms, with the brilliance of a flame*. Zongzhen had planted the pits in the Liao imperial garden, and to his surprise, one had flourished into a tree. This year, the tree

had borne these eleven peaches, which he now plucked and sent back to Duan Ling.

If Duan Ling had more he wished to say, come spring next year, he should visit Zhongjing in person so they might become reacquainted after their long parting.

Duan Ling folded the letter closed and slumped back on the divan. After a long moment, he blew out a breath. He took the peaches outside and explained their meaning to Wu Du. Now that they were separated across different parts of the world, Duan Ling could only hope things wouldn't end up like they had with Batu.

Wu Du's attention, however, snagged on a different detail. "Someone tried to assassinate him?" he asked, perplexed.

"Yes," Duan Ling said, remembering. "I saved his life, so maybe he sees the grain loan as repaying that debt. Anything more will have to wait until we meet again."

It was only to be expected that, standing as they did now on their respective nations' sides, they couldn't afford to be ruled by sentiment. Without further guarantees, Yelü Zongzhen wouldn't continue helping him unconditionally. Duan Ling would need to offer Liao some tangible benefit for him to act further—or at least demonstrate sufficient potential gains.

"Don't be so cynical," Wu Du said. "There's surely some affection in it. Maybe half and half."

"Mn," Duan Ling agreed with a nod.

"I hear the Liao emperor has a full harem—an empress, consorts, the works. So you'd better…"

"What are you blabbering about!" Duan Ling lifted the box as if to beat Wu Du with it.

Wu Du laughed, gazing at Duan Ling under the bright sunlight, and leaned in to kiss his cheek.

"I want to plant these peaches," Duan Ling said.

"I'll help."

Wu Du rolled up his sleeves and joined Duan Ling in planting the peach pits in the yard. Whether any would take root and survive was anyone's guess. When he was satisfied, Duan Ling patted the dirt off his hands and summoned his people—Lin Yunqi, Yan Di, Wang Zheng, and Shi Qi—and informed them he'd be leaving for a few days. Fei Hongde would temporarily oversee the residence's affairs.

Zheng Yan was gallivanting about who knew where, so Wu Du left him a letter asking him to watch over things in their absence. He and Duan Ling spent the rest of the morning mustering an expedition force of four hundred men and struck out for the Xun River after noon.

They reached the river's northern shore amid the deepening colors of twilight, the last of the day bathing the rolling hills in dusk's dim glow.

"What's the plan?" Wu Du asked. "After reading that Liao emperor's letter, you want to raid Liao territory?"

"No," Duan Ling said. "Xunyang is almost entirely deserted. The Khitan couldn't manage to hold it after the Mongols' repeated incursions; they withdrew their people back into the cities. Look here."

Duan Ling unfurled the map to show Wu Du the place he had in mind.

They rode Skychaser, Duan Ling sitting in the front while Wu Du lazily held the reins from behind him, guiding the horse along the bank with one arm around Duan Ling.

"Starting from Heishan Valley, there's a waterway following the mountain rivers down to the Xun," Duan Ling said.

"Mn," Wu Du hummed, chin resting on Duan Ling's shoulder as he studied the map.

"We'll cut down the trees here," Duan Ling said. "As fast as we can. We can throw the logs into the river to float downstream, then wait here where the channel narrows for them to arrive. It's only about fifteen li upstream from Ye."

"Got it," Wu Du said.

"We'll chop down around eight thousand trees," Duan Ling said. "This is our winter charcoal."

Chapter 144

THE LAST FLOODS of autumn surged as they left Ye behind and headed northeast, where the river upstream rushed past treacherous banks.

“We should dig a canal here next spring for irrigation,” Duan Ling said.

“Mn,” Wu Du agreed, gazing across the river at the opposite shore. He had much to do—anything that required physical labor was the responsibility of the garrison.

As they traveled, he examined the surrounding terrain. The two large hills on either side formed a deep valley, which the Xun River inundated during the summer, and which slowly drained after the ninth month. The river flowed from the northeast toward the southwest, turning a bend north of Ye before coursing back eastward through Shandong and out to sea.

“So when the logs float downstream, they’ll pile up here. I think it’ll work,” Wu Du said.

Their troop of four hundred cautiously led their horses down the narrow path to cross the river.

“Stay alert,” Wu Du ordered. “We’re entering Liao territory.”

After being plundered so often by the Mongols, the opposite shore was desolate. What had once been Han soil was now nothing more than a deserted wasteland.

Hills and mountains rose all around. The official road had long been abandoned, weeds encroaching almost to its center. Wu Du had intended to rest during the day and travel at night to avoid alerting any Khitan, but this proved wholly unnecessary. There wasn’t a single soul left in the Xunbei area. They marched for a whole day, encountering only the ruins of villages and grasses grown almost as tall as a man. Anywhere the Mongols had burned down homes, the vegetation grew back in profusion, veiling the sorrow that had once been.

Travel was slow. Duan Ling surveyed the terrain and charted the land as they went. In the event of a new war, the location of every hill and gully

was precious information.

Another day's ride brought them into the Mangshan region. West of this was Xunyang—and north of that, Shangzi.

Their path was flush with fowl and beasts foraging for food, their numbers burgeoning as autumn set in. No pot was without game when they stopped to break their fast. Compared to the vast swaths of barren land in Ye and Hejian, Xunbei was a rich and bountiful place. Alas, it was not the virtues of the land that led it to be so sparsely populated.

"This is it," Duan Ling said. "Heishan Valley is right ahead."

Multiple smaller streams ran through Heishan Valley, converging into one before flowing southward.

"Let's begin," Wu Du said. "Everyone—start cutting!"

Most of the trees in the valley were pines, though there were also firs and ginkgoes. Autumn's arrival had adorned the forest in layers of golden yellow leaves mingled with dark green needles, dyeing the entire mountain in vibrant colors. Stretches of black rock jutted stark against those hues, giving Heishan Valley its name: the valley of the black mountains.

Wu Du assigned a few squadrons to patrol, and the remaining soldiers untied the logging axes from their waists and unpacked saws. Duan Ling produced a schematic he'd obtained from Yan Di and instructed the soldiers to cut down one tree first, then used it to assemble a simple water-powered mechanism for mounting the saw. This task took an entire day, but by dusk, the hydraulic saw was operational. The logged trees were tossed into the river to spin—in order to strip them of excess branches—then stacked on the bank. Once enough had piled up, they would be thrown into the river in batches and guided downstream by the men.

Duan Ling worked until his hands blistered even under his gloves. When Wu Du tried to stop him, Duan Ling waved him off, insisting he could handle himself.

"You're not as familiar with these," Duan Ling told him, tightening a wooden dowel. He'd been studying Yan Di's schematics for days. "Leave it to me."

Night fell; the soldiers settled down to rest. Wu Du made his rounds as campfires were kindled throughout the valley. In addition to surveying the area when they first arrived and the construction of the water-powered wheel, they'd managed to process three large pine trees in a single day—remarkably fast work. If they kept up the pace, they could fell three hundred trees per day starting in the morning.

Within a month, the issue of winter fuel would be solved.

After dinner, Wu Du found a secluded spot to bed down for the night. Duan Ling lay down beside him in the wilderness, exhausted and sore all over, and gazed up at the stars.

"Was your mother from Hebei?" Wu Du asked.

"Mn," Duan Ling hummed, rolling onto his side to study Wu Du's features. "Laoye, where are you from?"

Their faces were very close. Duan Ling reached out to run a finger over the bridge of Wu Du's nose, his eyebrows, then the shell of his ear. Wu Du chuckled, catching Duan Ling's hand. "Where does Laoye look like he's from?" he asked.

"Western Liang," Duan Ling said seriously.

Wu Du blinked.

"My dad said Tangut men have fine, well-proportioned features," Duan Ling said with a grin. "And that they act like stags in rut all day."

Realizing Duan Ling was teasing him, Wu Du rolled on top of him and pinned him down. "You're right. Sounds like I really am a Tangut…"

Duan Ling begged for mercy at once. After the exhausting day he'd had, his whole body ached; he couldn't handle any more exertion. Wu Du ignored his protests and brushed his nose against Duan Ling's before silencing him with a kiss.

"Where specifically do I resemble a Tangut? Tell me in detail," Wu Du whispered into his ear.

Duan Ling's fingers brushed over Wu Du's thick, distinct brows. He replied softly, "Here… And here…"

As he spoke, he reached down to unfasten Wu Du's belt, revealing the clean, white inner robe beneath. The bronzed chest beneath was toned and strong, like the chest of a seasoned Tangut hunter who broke wild stallions, and the hard lines of his abdomen resembled those of a cavalryman who galloped freely across the grasslands.

"And…here." Duan Ling felt Wu Du's hardness pressed against his belly and reached down into his pants to capture that massive erection. Wu Du's cock filled his hand beautifully, exuding masculine power like the hilt of a sword. Duan Ling rubbed his thumb over the head in gentle circles. "Mn…here too."

"Did you feel up the same places on that Tangut boy?" Wu Du demanded, jealousy creeping into his voice.

Duan Ling laughed. "Yeah, we used to take baths together when we were little."

He had indeed bathed together with Batu and Helian Bo, but they'd been children then. None of them had been like Wu Du, who emanated the aggressive, dominant aura of a full-grown man.

Wu Du raised his brows. "Whose is bigger?"

"Yours, of course," Duan Ling replied honestly.

Truly, out of all the ones he'd seen and encountered, Wu Du's was the biggest—although he didn't mention that the others had been boys, back then.

Wu Du went a step further, untying the string of his pants and stripping off his outer robe, proudly baring his nakedness as he rose up onto his knees. Duan Ling, half propped on one elbow, gawked at the picture laid out before him. Beneath the moonlight, Wu Du's toned body radiated a man's sensual allure. Blood rushed to Duan Ling's head as he flushed, the tips of his ears burning.

"Want a taste?" Taking himself in hand, Wu Du guided his length toward Duan Ling's lips.

Duan Ling's breath quickened; he blushed a deep red. He gave the head a tentative lick, then leaned forward and attempted to swallow it whole. Wu Du began moving, rocking his hips to feed his cock into Duan

Ling's mouth, stifling his moans. The forest filled with the sound of their ragged breathing. After another few moments, Wu Du sat back and patted his thigh, gesturing for Duan Ling to settle down into his lap.

Pillowing his head on Wu Du's leg, Duan Ling sucked his cock while pinching and toying with his own hardened nipple. Panting, Wu Du reached for Duan Ling's robes and stripped him bare as well.

Wind blew over the hills, raising goosebumps on Duan Ling's naked skin, but inside he was burning hot from Wu Du's teasing hands.

Wu Du drew him up with a chuckle. "Didn't you say you were tired?"

"Mm," Duan Ling hummed, winding his arms around Wu Du's neck as he straddled him. They were both totally bare, holding each other as they sat in the pile of their discarded clothes. Wu Du's fingers wandered up Duan Ling's back. He breathed in deeply, savoring the refreshing scent of a young man. Duan Ling tilted his head to kiss him hard.

"I want you," Duan Ling whispered against his mouth.

"Let me. Just enjoy the ride," Wu Du replied, his voice equally soft.

As their tongues slid against each other, his hard, hot cock—slick with saliva and precum—slowly breached Duan Ling. He shuddered at the stretch of entry, his fingers digging into Wu Du's powerful shoulders. Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes.

Wu Du paused, fully sheathed, waiting for Duan Ling to adjust; in turn, Duan Ling closed his eyes to savor the sensation of being filled to the brim. After a few breaths, Wu Du pushed a little deeper, lighting Duan Ling's nerves up with a thrill of pleasure.

He opened his eyes and met Wu Du's adoring gaze.

Wu Du swallowed hard, then broke into a smile—a wicked glint twinkling in his eyes. "Are all Tanguts also hung like horses?"

"I…I don't know." Duan Ling's breath hitched. He buried his face against Wu Du's neck and pleaded, "But yours is really too big. Go easy."

Wu Du began rocking his hips. Even that gentle motion had Duan Ling whimpering. His breathless moans triggered Wu Du's beastlier urges, but for fear of hurting him, he maintained a slow and halting rhythm.

Duan Ling shuddered and sat up straighter, letting himself sink further down onto Wu Du's cock. Thinking he was getting chilly from the wind, Wu Du murmured, "Cold?"

"No…" Duan Ling's head was hazy with desire, his focus entirely consumed by the massive cock driving steadily into the deepest parts of him.

"*Ah!*" he gasped aloud as Wu Du slid over a sensitive spot.

The leaves around them rustled; the wind carried the crisp scent of the forest, the world, of all the beings within it, making him shiver. Pleasure rippled through him like a tide, like the pines swaying across the hills, lapping at his body in rhythm with the skillful motion of Wu Du's hips.

"I love you," Wu Du panted beside Duan Ling's ear, then captured his lips in a bruising kiss—crushing them soft and red. He laid Duan Ling down on his back, bearing down on him with all the strength in his muscular chest and shoulders.

They locked gazes, and Wu Du leaned in close again.

"Don't ever leave me…" Duan Ling moaned.

"I won't. I'll protect you," Wu Du whispered back.

He enveloped Duan Ling completely, shielding him from the winds. They held each other tight, bodies entwined, Wu Du never once stopping as he drove again and again into Duan Ling. They were pressed flush, skin to skin, from their lips down to their chests, from their chests down to their hips, their arms wrapped around each other—only at times like this could they be so thoroughly enmeshed within one another.

The ribbon of shimmering stars above was mirrored in Duan Ling's eyes. All the wilderness around them seemed to fade away as Wu Du released his hot spend into Duan Ling with one final hard thrust. They gazed at each other, chests heaving. Duan Ling caressed Wu Du's face and leaned up to kiss his cheek.

Wu Du held Duan Ling for a long time. The robes spread beneath them were soaked with sweat, clinging to his skin. Duan Ling's clothes were similarly scattered. He gazed at Wu Du as he caught his breath, then tugged him back down to kiss him again, not entirely satiated.

After taking Duan Ling with the force of the pounding rain, Wu Du didn’t want to let him go. He draped his robes carelessly over their waists, and they lay together under the trees, clinging to each other and whispering in each other’s ears.

“My biggest regret in life is that I took the road to Jiang Prefecture instead of Runan that day,” Wu Du said softly. “Had I gone to Runan, I would’ve gotten a proper look to see which of the kids in the city was you.”

Duan Ling grinned. “Even if you came to Runan, you might not have run into me. Maybe just a fleeting glance, and we’d have missed each other.”

As a child, Duan Ling had been filthy, running around all day in the company of beggars, dirty-faced with his hair mussed and clothes ragged. He would have been completely unrecognizable.

“Shiniang once said everyone has their own fate, decided the moment they’re born,” Wu Du replied. “Who knows. If I’d gone to Runan, I might have stood outside your Duan residence’s door and watched you run in and out.”

Resting his head on Wu Du’s bare chest, Duan Ling smiled. “Then you’d have to remember to buy me a bowl of wontons.”

“I’ll take you right now,” Wu Du declared. “To Runan? Let’s go.”

Duan Ling didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t as if he’d never thought of visiting his old home, but he’d been preoccupied with the logging trip, wondering if things would go smoothly. Yet that business was mostly settled now, and there was no need to do the physical labor himself. Wu Du’s bold proclamation made him suddenly want to check in on the Duan family again.

He wondered if Madam Duan and her maids would dare beat or scold him when they saw him again. With Wu Du at his back, he feared no one.

But—the strongest memory he had of that place, the one that left the greatest impression even now, was Lang Junxia’s warmth amid the blizzard, and the bowl of wontons he’d eaten under the flickering alley lamplight.

To return home with Wu Du while thinking of another wasn’t fair to him.

“Maybe next time,” Duan Ling said, distracted. “There are some things I still haven’t let go of.”

Wu Du scooped Duan Ling up in his arms.

“Hey, I haven’t agreed yet!” Duan Ling yelped.

Wu Du helped him dress and settled him astride Skychaser, then swung into the saddle behind him. Without another word, they descended the mountain.

Duan Ling gave up and curled closer into Wu Du’s arms. He could tell Wu Du had guessed what was on his mind, and that he wanted to help him find closure. On that day eight years ago, when Lang Junxia had carried him away from Runan, they’d taken this same road. It had been a snowy winter night, then, and the mountains had risen high on either side like a painting.

Now, autumn wind blew through the long night; the first stars scattered across the vault of the sky shimmered over the land. The grass bent low under the passing breezes. Wu Du’s robes fluttered as he spurred Skychaser onto the main road, galloping freely with Duan Ling through the wild winds toward distant Runan, shrouded in darkness. Leaning against Wu Du’s warm chest, Duan Ling gradually drifted off to sleep. To think he was returning. Leaving home, then coming back—it was as if all the complicated and thrilling events he’d experienced since he’d left had been nothing but a grand and fleeting dream. The man behind him in the saddle seemed to have always been there, accompanying him to the ends of the earth, until spring came and the flowers bloomed.

When Skychaser’s hoofbeats halted, Duan Ling woke.

“Are we there?” he asked groggily.

Wu Du didn’t answer, gazing up at the city walls.

They’d reached the city gates a few hours after midnight. High above them were two crumbling characters that made up the name *Runan*. The side gate was ajar, weathered and broken, and even in the darkness, the walls showed the telltale scars of fire.

“Should we go in?” Wu Du asked, surprised to find the city seemingly abandoned.

“Let’s take a look,” Duan Ling said.

Wu Du felt terrible. He shouldn’t have voiced his spur-of-the-moment suggestion—Runan was an empty city, its people long gone.

“We can go in through the eastern gate,” Duan Ling said, all his sleepiness vanishing. He took the reins and flicked them. “I remember the way.”

Although he’d been no more than eight when he left, Duan Ling had revisited his hometown countless times in his dreams. He urged Skychaser along the city wall.

“We should go back,” Wu Du said. “We can come some other time.”

“Tomorrow, let’s go pay our respects to my mom,” Duan Ling said as if he hadn’t spoken.

After a moment of thought, Wu Du agreed. Following Cai Yan’s return to court, that imposter had never once mentioned Duan Xiaowan, nor arranged for Duan Ling’s parents to be buried together. Or maybe he had, and Duan Ling just hadn’t heard about it. Regardless, no one had come to Runan to move the grave. After all, this had become Liao territory, and crossing the border was a sensitive affair.

If Duan Ling ascended the throne in the future, he would rebury his parents together. His father had once said that when he’d returned south, he’d first intended to find his mother.

They rode only a short way before coming upon a collapsed section of the wall. Duan Ling urged Skychaser over the rubble and into the city. He scanned the surrounding streets. Many of the houses were damaged, some entirely burned to the ground. The autumn wind whistled down the desolate main street. The city was shrouded in darkness without a single lamp lit. No one lived here anymore.

Runan had become a ghost town—one where not even a dog’s lonely barking could be heard. Only the willow-lined riverbank remained unchanged, the water’s soft murmuring breaking the silence of the empty night.

Chapter 145

“I USED TO PLAY by the river a lot,” Duan Ling told Wu Du over his shoulder.

“Let me take the reins. Just tell me where to go,” Wu Du said. He cast his eyes over their surroundings, worried some assassin might be lying in ambush—but even if the shadow squad was on their tail, they couldn’t know he and Duan Ling would come to Runan.

“When Zhao Kui ordered you to catch me, did he mention Runan?” Duan Ling asked quietly.

“No,” Wu Du replied. “He didn’t know this was your mother’s hometown, or even that the late emperor had a son. It was just a guess based on Lang Junxia’s movements.”

“Then the shadow squad shouldn’t know either.”

“Shh.” Wu Du gestured for him to be silent. He stopped Skychaser by the riverside, where the rushing water was the only sound. “Did you hear that?”

“No,” Duan Ling replied, confused. He hadn’t been trained as an assassin, and his ears weren’t as keen as Wu Du’s.

“There are still people here somewhere,” Wu Du said. “Or maybe it’s just the wind.”

Except now Duan Ling heard a noise too—a quiet snap from deep within a distant alleyway, as if someone was moving something around.

“It could be a leopard cat or a jackal,” Duan Ling suggested.

Wu Du put a finger to his lips. The pair dismounted and left Skychaser at the entrance of the alleyway with his reins dangling. Skychaser took a few steps after them—only when Duan Ling lifted a hand did he stay put.

He and Wu Du tiptoed into the alley.

A crisp snap came from further in. This time Duan Ling heard it clearly: The sound of a gate slotting into place.

Clutching the sheathed Flashblade, Wu Du edged further into the alley, the fingers of his other hand interlocked with Duan Ling's.

Snap.

Duan Ling's heart leapt into his throat. "This is the Duan residence," he whispered, barely audible.

Wu Du cast him a hesitant look, but Duan Ling nudged him forward. They turned the corner into another side alley. There was another *snap*; Duan Ling jumped.

"It's empty," Wu Du said, prodding one of the wooden gates open with his scabbard to illustrate his point. He drew it back, and the gate made the same snapping sound.

It was just the wind. Once in a while, a breeze blew the gate to the back courtyard open, and it cracked as it swung crookedly back into place.

Still, Duan Ling hesitated before the gate.

"What is it?" Wu Du asked.

"This shouldn't be here. What's going on?" Duan Ling's memories were all jumbled up.

"What shouldn't be here?" Wu Du asked.

"The road outside the alley always led to the main gates of the Duan residence… When was *this* gate built? How come the courtyard walls are different? There used to be a pond here, but it's gone now, and everything else is gone too. How did this place—turn into another house?"

Wu Du had no answers for him.

Duan Ling felt as if he'd been going home as usual, along a familiar path, only to find upon reaching his destination that it was not his home at all. Even the structure of the courtyard house was different than in his memories.

"Maybe they moved?" Wu Du suggested.

"But did they take the walls with them too? And the courtyards next door are different also," Duan Ling said.

Not only had the Duan residence changed significantly, the households to the east and west had as well. What on earth had happened

here? Duan Ling was overcome by a strange feeling of dread.

He searched every corner of the residence while Wu Du followed close on his heels, confirming it was not the Duan residence of his memories. Every inch of the courtyard house was foreign to him.

“Maybe you remembered wrong?” Wu Du said.

“No,” Duan Ling insisted, frowning. “I would never.”

It wouldn’t be abnormal for things to differ from the memories of his six-year-old self. Perhaps he’d walked into an alleyway that only looked like the one outside the Duan residence. Or perhaps the Duan family had come upon a fortune and reconstructed every inch of their property.

But Duan Ling’s mind stubbornly insisted it couldn’t be so. Even if the residence had been renovated, the central layout wouldn’t have changed. He paced down the alley again and again, until the morning star appeared low on the horizon, before ultimately walking back out with his head hung low.

Wu Du watched him with amusement.

“What are you smiling at?” Duan Ling asked.

“So you do have an obstinate side.”

Duan Ling was never one to take Wu Du’s teasing to heart. He paid him no heed.

The only possible scenario he could imagine was that another family had bought the Duan residence and had, out of pure distaste for the property, torn down every wall and building, then built a smaller, shabbier home in its place. After that maybe the Mongols had invaded, and the people of Runan had fled, leaving this rundown household that didn’t hold a single memory for Duan Ling.

“I’m going to visit my mother’s grave,” Duan Ling announced.

“Eat something first,” Wu Du urged him. “Have a drink, take a rest.”

Duan Ling was tired, his shoulders slumped in disappointment. He stopped when he came to the street and rubbed the alley’s dust out of his eyes.

Wu Du poured him some water. “Which way from here?”

The first light of dawn was breaking outside the walls. The wind whistled past—and before Duan Ling could react, a sword stabbed toward Wu Du's back.

Wu Du unsheathed Flashblade with a harsh scrape and shoved Duan Ling behind him, the hems of his robes flaring as he whirled and parried the strike. The assassin, over six feet tall and dressed head to toe in black, moved like a gust of wind. He and Wu Du pressed forward as their blades clashed. All at once, a gut feeling made Duan Ling cry out:

"Changliu-jun!"

At that precise moment, the tall assassin swung for Wu Du's shoulder. Wu Du produced his glinting brass knuckles with a flick of his hand, locking Changliu-jun's Sunstreak in their grooves before swinging away. The resultant clang lanced painfully through Duan Ling's ears. Wu Du angled his sword.

The red glare of the rising sun reflected off Flashblade into the masked assassin's eyes, making him squint. Sensing danger, the assassin reeled backward, Wu Du's blade nearly slicing off his mask as he retreated.

"Heh heh." The assassin snickered in a familiar voice.

Duan Ling couldn't believe him.

"Hey, stop it!" Changliu-jun yelled as Wu Du took another swing at him. He'd only been itching to test Wu Du's skills when he ambushed him, but Wu Du stuck to him like a shadow. "Can't an assassin have some fun?"

"All right, settle down," Duan Ling said, holding his hands up in a placating gesture.

Grudgingly, Wu Du sheathed his sword.

"I've been following you for a while," Changliu-jun said. "And then I saw you two just standing there."

A bad feeling washed over Duan Ling. "Where were you hiding?"

Changliu-jun pointed toward the old inn, right next to where Duan Ling had stood rubbing his eyes.

"Changliu-jun," Wu Du sneered. "Don't pull another stunt like this, or Master Wu will definitely poison you."

Changliu-jun ignored him, his gaze shifting to Duan Ling. “Do you really think I would deceive and kill my teacher?”

“Who knows what goes on in that head of yours,” Wu Du said scornfully.

“Disciple, how did you end up here?” Duan Ling asked.

In fact, he was badly shaken. Had Changliu-jun come to Runan on Mu Kuangda’s orders—perhaps searching for anyone remaining from the Duan household? Duan Ling hoped he was wrong.

“Follow me,” Changliu-jun said, sheathing Sunstreak.

What should they do? Encountering Changliu-jun here of all places… Duan Ling looked to Wu Du, who had taken Skychaser’s reins, and Wu Du took his hand and squeezed in silent reassurance. They exchanged another glance as Changliu-jun led them forward. Runan was a dead city, and the atmosphere seemed even more eerie without the sound of their voices.

“Teacher,” Changliu-jun said over his shoulder, clicking his tongue. “How come you don’t look very happy to see me?”

Duan Ling didn’t know how to respond. He couldn’t laugh, but neither could he answer with a straight face. “Next time,” he said with lips twitching, “can you perhaps say hello some other way?”

“C’mere,” Changliu-jun said, reaching out an arm.

Duan Ling turned back to Wu Du, his eyes conveying that staying quiet like this would be too strange. He caught up to Changliu-jun and let the assassin sling an arm around his shoulders. Changliu-jun was the tallest of the Four Great Assassins, and like this, Duan Ling looked like a puppy being held by the scuff.

“How is it, being a governor?” he asked.

“It’s…okay,” said Duan Ling. “What are you doing out here, anyway?”

“His Excellency sent me to find someone. Oh, right—why are *you* two here?”

Duan Ling explained that they had a midnight craving while cutting trees at the Liao border and had ridden out to Runan to purchase food.

When they had arrived, they discovered the city dead and silent.

“Most of the people of Runan moved to Anxi after the Mongols raided it one too many times,” Changliu-jun said. “The city is northwest from here, along Mount Luoyan.”

Just like I thought… A spark of hope kindled in Duan Ling’s heart. Then the Duan family had likely moved as well. *But wait—Changliu-jun said Mu Kuangda sent him to find someone. Who?*

Duan Ling’s heart pounded as Changliu-jun led them through the empty streets. They stopped outside an abandoned teahouse.

“Mister,” he called inside. “You’ll never guess who I ran into.”

A man lay on a tattered bamboo mat within. When he heard Changliu-jun’s voice, he sat upright, rubbing bleary eyes.

“Wang Shan?” he asked.

“Mister Chang Pin!” Duan Ling exclaimed, almost too astonished for words.

“Chang Pin?” Wu Du repeated, his brow furrowing.

Within a quarter hour, Changliu-jun had put water on to boil and Wu Du had divided up their rations. They drank the hot water from chipped tea bowls and ate the rations as a makeshift breakfast.

“I planned to stop over in Runan to rest for a day before setting out for Ye to seek your help.” Despite the disheveled state of his hair and the shabbiness of his clothes, Chang Pin spoke in his usual measured tone. Duan Ling couldn’t help but find it comical.

He was just passing through. Duan Ling’s heartbeat settled back into a steady rhythm. He smiled, his words coming much more freely now: “And how did Mister Chang Pin end up in Runan?”

“It’s a long story.” Chang Pin sighed. “You can ask Prime Minister Mu for the details when you get back. He’ll explain the whole affair to you in clear order.”

“We won’t be going back for three years at least,” Duan Ling said ruefully.

Chang Pin smiled. “You’ve already distinguished yourself on the battlefield. Although officials from the capital are customarily expected to hold a post for three years, the court is in dire need of able men. There’s no need for the top three scorers on the imperial exams to follow such customs to the dot. Prime Minister Mu has already mentioned that next autumn, once the crisis in Hebei is settled, he plans to summon the two of you back to the capital—he needs every man he can get.”

Wu Du propped his elbow on the tea table behind him, slouching backward with one leg casually stacked on the other. “What if we don’t want to go back?”

“Oh my,” Chang Pin said in a gently mocking tone. “The commandant holds a position of the fourth rank, while the rest of us are mere peasants. It would seem that we’ve impinged upon his dignity.” He rose as if to bow in apology.

Duan Ling hurriedly pressed him back down. They couldn’t possibly afford to be on the receiving end of Chang Pin’s bows—this man was full of clever ideas. Who knew how he would repay them for the offense?

“Mister Chang Pin, let’s keep things straight. We all come from the same household. There’s no need for us to speak in riddles,” he said.

Wu Du turned to Changliu-jun. “Did you two come here looking for the Guardian?”

Aside from the Guardian of the Realm, Wu Du couldn’t guess what important task could have summoned both Changliu-jun and Chang Pin—Mu Kuangda’s most trusted civil and military aides—away from his side.

“The Guardian?” Confusion was written across Chang Pin’s face. “Of course not. My lords, this matter is too complicated to explain quickly. Since we’ve had our breakfast, please follow me.”

Where are we going now? Duan Ling moaned to himself. He’d been dragged around since midnight, first by Wu Du to Runan, then by Changliu-jun to the teahouse. Now Chang Pin wanted to take him to yet another location. All the running around was making his head spin.

But Chang Pin was already on his feet waiting. It wasn’t as if Duan Ling could refuse; he rose to his feet and shuffled after him.

Chapter 146

THE MORNING SUN rose over the city. The previous night, Duan Ling had only gotten a dim look at Runan, unable to clearly see the state of things. Only now he saw the city as it was: The bridge he'd once slept under now sheltered a pile of ashen bones, and the shops lining the streets were dilapidated. Loose scraps of paper fluttered past on the breeze. A murder of crows gathered in a courtyard, cawing raucously.

Duan Ling faltered in his steps, suddenly struck with the urge to turn back. Wu Du covered his eyes with one hand and nudged him forward.

It wasn't as if Duan Ling had never killed anyone, but this was his hometown. Every inch of the city, every patch of shade under the trees—the teahouse, the noodle stall, the oil shop, the streets that carriages had traveled, even the offices of the Khitan officials were all places where he'd once left his footsteps.

"This way," Chang Pin called over his shoulder.

"What happened to Runan?" asked Duan Ling.

"Two years ago, when the Mongols rode for us, they uprooted every settlement in their path—including Runan. They breached the walls and plundered the city. The citizens died or fled," Chang Pin explained. "Leaving Runan in the state you see now."

Duan Ling thought about the year he'd fled south from the Xianbei Mountains to Xichuan, and how many different dialects he'd heard among the crowds. Perhaps the people of Runan had been there too.

Wu Du shot him a look—*don't ask too much*, he seemed to be saying, lest Chang Pin sense something was off. Duan Ling's curiosity was unsatisfied, but knew he had to drop the subject. If they roused Chang Pin's suspicions, it would only spell trouble.

Chang Pin led them through the gates of an abandoned manor and came to a stop in the main courtyard.

"Prime Minister Mu sent me to Xunbei to find a man," he explained. "I located him in Anxi, but he's very old; I didn't dare risk taking him back

with me to the capital in the summer heat."

Duan Ling and Wu Du listened to his story in silence.

"In the sixth month, I wrote a letter and entrusted it to a young servant of mine named Jin-er for delivery to the capital. He disappeared on the road, and the letter never reached its destination. On the eighteenth day of the seventh month, the Mongols came up from the south to rape and pillage their way through Anxi, killing or stealing everything in their path and burning most of the villages in this part of Liao to ashes."

Dread shot through Duan Ling. "We chased Borjigin Batu back over the Xun River. It seems they continued north along the Liao-Yuan border," he said.

"Indeed," said Chang Pin. "The Yuan forces riding north and those riding south converged on Anxi and burned every last inch of the city. This newly combined army is now laying siege to Luoyan."

Duan Ling reeled backward in shock.

"The elderly man we were searching for was in Anxi on the night of the raid. I sent someone through the chaos to bring him safely to Luoyan, but they were attacked en route. Thankfully, my man kept his life by hiding beneath the carriage—but when he emerged, the old man was gone. After searching the road for several days, I was unable to find a body. I held out hope he'd survived and fled with the refugees to Luoyan. I'd planned to go into Luoyan to ask for news of him, but with the Yuan army camped all around the city, I didn't dare act rashly. Meeting my end here without anything to show for it would be less than wise."

Why had Mu Kuangda sent Chang Pin to find some old man? Why then, after losing that man, had he not gone straight back to Jiang Prefectural City, but appeared instead in Runan? Duan Ling became increasingly skeptical as he listened.

"You should return to the capital," Wu Du said. "As officials of the imperial court, the two of us are already overstepping our bounds in being here. We need to take our men back to Ye within the month. There are still many loose ends in Hebei."

"His Excellency is well aware of all you've done in Ye. Wang Shan, Wu Du—as someone who has served Prime Minister Mu a tad longer than

you, allow me to shamelessly call myself your elder brother. This person we're searching for is of utmost importance, and if there are also others searching for him…"

Chang Pin trailed off, leaving the rest to their imagination.

Duan Ling frowned. Any matter Chang Pin deemed "of utmost importance" truly must be.

"If you're willing to go into Luoyan on my behalf to look for this man, I'll take care of everything in Ye," Chang Pin promised.

"Ye has enough food and fuel for winter. We don't necessarily need your help," Duan Ling replied. "Mister Chang Pin, we're all smart people here, and you've known me since the day I came into the prime minister's household. Since this is Prime Minister Mu's order, of course we'll do our best to carry it out—but you must give me all the details, even if solely to make it easier for me to enter the city and find this man you're seeking."

Duan Ling glanced at Wu Du, who was frowning in silence. After a significant pause, he nodded, deferring to Duan Ling.

Chang Pin evinced great hesitation at his request. A thought occurred to Duan Ling. Was it possible the Duan family had moved to Anxi, and that Mu Kuangda had, through his own lengthy investigation, learned of the true crown prince's history with them? Did he intend to bring a witness from the Duan family to court to prove Cai Yan was a fake?

After a lengthy period of consideration, Chang Pin said in his gravest tone, "For your own sake, I won't tell you. Wang Shan, you are a young man with limitless potential. Simply do this task without asking unnecessary questions and you will win yourself a shining future. You're not like me, a scholar who only passed entry-level exams. You are a tanhua."

His words confirmed Duan Ling's worrisome thought, and the blood ran cold in his veins.

At a gesture from Chang Pin, Changliu-jun pushed open the doors on one side of the corridor.

"Let me finish explaining first," Chang Pin said. "As it stands, I could neither go into the city nor finish the task Prime Minister Mu had given me.

Whether the man is alive or dead, he must be accounted for; I cannot go back empty-handed. I waited in Runan expecting that His Excellency would eventually send someone here in search of me."

This gave credence to another of Duan Ling's stray thoughts: If Mu Kuangda had sent Chang Pin to Runan in search of the old man, only to lose contact with him, he would certainly send another trusted subordinate after Chang Pin—and since Chang Pin's first destination was Runan, it would also be the first stop of whomever was sent looking for him.

Chang Pin's next words confirmed as much. "However," he continued, "I didn't think the one to come would be Changliu-jun. He can't go into Luoyan any more easily than I can, for two reasons. Firstly, the city is heavily patrolled, with the Yuan army at the gates. Secondly, Changliu-jun can't… Well, it's not as easy for him to find the man we need."

"Secondly, I can't read," Changliu-jun said huffily. "I'm just a killer. I don't understand the words written on the city registers and I stick out too much to ask for news on the streets. Thirdly, Luoyan is truly sealed tight. I reckon the siege will last until next spring, but many will freeze to death in the winter snowstorms. We can't take our sweet time asking around—we must find him as soon as possible."

Duan Ling didn't know what else to say.

"So you want us to sneak into Luoyan, is that it?" Wu Du said.

Chang Pin nodded. "We were planning to set out for Ye and find the two of you to see if we could join forces, but as we were about to leave Runan, we ran into a Tangut father and son on the city's outskirts."

Abruptly, Duan Ling realized that the hall was completely silent. There was none of the noise that would come from any hostages being held. He was repulsed more than anything by what he thought he was about to see; his eyes filled with fear. Wu Du's reaction was just as fast, his eyebrows knitting.

Duan Ling took a step back as Chang Pin pushed the door open. The coppery smell of blood wafted out. Wu Du stepped aside to make way, peering into the shadowy room through the wooden lattice of the window. Two figures slumped side by side in the far corner, an adult and a child, both in white underrobes with their hair lank.

Two fresh corpses.

Changliu-jun retrieved their clothes and a cloth bundle from inside the room, while Chang Pin retrieved a folded document.

“The father and son were fur traders heading for Yuan through Liao territory. It seemed they intended to cross at Anxi then head to Luoyan for trade, but they met an unfortunate end here in Runan. Their bag with all their identifying articles was merely tossed aside. Seeing as they’re already dead, I thought—why not disguise myself as a Tangut merchant and enter Luoyan that way? But the man’s travel papers have both his and his son’s names, and I didn’t know where to acquire a son.”

As he spoke, the drama played out behind Duan Ling’s eyes, act by act:

A Tangut father and son traveling from Western Liang had reached Runan, their last stop before their journey veered northward, and paused to rest in the abandoned city for a night. They lit a fire and ate some of their rations.

Changliu-jun hid himself behind the courtyard walls as Chang Pin approached and struck up a conversation in Tangut. Upon finding out that they were heading for Luoyan, he’d asked them for help finding someone.

However, when the pair heard Liao and Yuan were at war, they refused to risk the journey, declining Chang Pin’s request and determining to head south into Chen instead.

Chang Pin, having failed in his attempt, ordered Changliu-jun to kill them to keep this secret “of utmost importance.”

“You speak Tangut,” Chang Pin said. “I heard that while you were at Tong Pass, you recognized the Tangut prince and even struck up a friendship.”

“That’s true,” Duan Ling confirmed. “But sir, you don’t look Tangut at all.”

“I won’t be going,” Chang Pin replied. He pointed toward Wu Du. “You two take their travel papers, since Wu Du is your adoptive fath—sworn brother. Together you look very much like a Tangut father and son.”

“I don’t know how to speak Tangut,” Wu Du said.

“We’ll say you’re mute,” Chang Pin told him. “With the Mongols laying siege to Luoyan, it’s difficult to get in, but not impossible. I just have to make a plan. Once you enter, you must come up with a plan to find a city register with the names of everyone who fled from Anxi to Luoyan. Use that to search for your target. I thought about writing his name on a slip of paper, giving that to Changliu-jun, and sending him into the city to look for a match, but he can’t tell the difference between an army registry and a household registry. And when there are too many names, he says the characters start to blur—”

“I get it,” Duan Ling said. “The register should be in the hands of the city clerk responsible for managing refugees.”

They couldn’t go about blindly searching for Chang Pin’s old man. It would be like searching for a needle in a haystack—there were simply too many people who answered to that description in Luoyan. Even if Chang Pin provided them with a portrait, it would be difficult to find anyone just by comparing faces on the street. Not to mention the last thing Chang Pin wanted was to reveal who this man was, given the seriousness of this great secret.

The best way would be to find the city clerk in charge of managing the Anxi refugees, swipe the register of names to confirm whether or not the man was alive, and if he was, look up his whereabouts.

Duan Ling was unbearably curious as to this man’s identity. If he’d once been part of the Duan household, then Duan Ling ought to recognize him. Then again, he could also be wrong about everything. The elderly man Mu Kuangda was seeking might have nothing to do with the crown prince. Even so—though the possibility was miniscule—Duan Ling had to be sure.

There was just one thing that didn’t fit: The Duan family he remembered hadn’t included any old man. And besides, could there truly be only one survivor out of the entire household?

Wu Du and Duan Ling accepted the Tangut robes from Changliu-jun. Duan Ling didn’t want to look upon the macabre scene in the hall again, so he and Wu Du slipped into another abandoned house across the street to change. The whole affair weighed heavily on his heart—but with Changliu-jun hovering outside the courtyard walls, Duan Ling was too afraid to say anything.

“Did you think of your father?” Wu Du asked, a question they wouldn’t have to worry about the other two overhearing. After all, everyone present knew the story of the young man named Wang Shan who lived in the Mu Manor. To them, he was the child of an herb merchant who’d been entrusted to Wu Du after his father’s death.

“Yeah,” Duan Ling said, his eyes prickling.

Wearing only his white underrobe, Wu Du held up the Tangut clothes and inspected them.

“That’s not how you wear it,” Duan Ling said.

Standing in his own underrobe, he dressed Wu Du in the borrowed clothes. Tangut men wore their lapels the opposite way, the right side folded over the left, and secured their inner robes with a belt that crossed their chest in front, then looped around from behind his waist.

After fastening the inner garment around his waist, Duan Ling put a pair of men’s pants on him. Then came a fur outer robe that fell all the way to his knees. When Wu Du’s outfit was nearly complete, Duan Ling had him sit on the divan and settled the last item on his head—a cap with a brown goose feather, which showed that the Tangut man hadn’t been anyone of high status.

Duan Ling looked him over. Wu Du reached out and wrapped his arms around him, tugging him forward so Duan Ling was straddling his thigh in his thin white underrobe. He lifted his eyes to meet Duan Ling’s.

Chapter 147

“I CAN’T BELIEVE what I was thinking about yesterday actually became real,” Wu Du said with a smile.

Duan Ling recalled what he’d shared the night before—that he wished he’d met Duan Ling when he was small to bring him home and raise him. He couldn’t help smiling too, and the sorrow he’d been feeling lifted from his mind.

“How do you say ‘dad’ in Tangut?” asked Wu Du.

“Older brothers, fathers, and paternal uncles are all called ‘ada.’”

Wu Du hummed and nodded, then paused in thought. “But I can’t speak if I’m disguised as a mute. I can only gesture.”

“That’s fine too,” Duan Ling replied. He, too, spent a moment thinking. The Han had a simple sign language used with those who couldn’t speak, but the Tanguts would have their own set of signs—so even if Wu Du made technically nonsensical gestures while he was pretending to be mute, the Khitan in Luoyan wouldn’t be able to tell.

“If we succeed, Prime Minister Mu might grant us a reward,” Wu Du said as he helped Duan Ling into his set of Tangut robes.

“What do you want to ask for?”

“Some silver I could use to move the White Tiger Temple,” said Wu Du. “I could buy a house in the mountains, so it would be easier to bring you home on our holidays in the future.”

Duan Ling faced him, the two caught in their own soft, mesmerizing world within those walls. The voices of Chang Pin and Changliu-jun carried in from the courtyard outside, and the two both glanced their direction. Wu Du finished lacing Duan Ling’s belt through the buckle at his side and put on his hat for him, and they walked out together to find Changliu-jun leaning against the wall, holding up a broken full-length mirror.

They inspected themselves in the reflection. Indeed, they made passable Tanguts.

“What will you tell the Luoyan guards? Practice it here first,” Chang Pin said in Tangut.

“My father and I came here from Tianshui County in Western Liang,” Duan Ling responded in the same language. “We descend from a family in Sha Prefecture and make our living trading furs. We want to buy tea from the Central Plains to bring back home. My father is deaf and mute, so I speak on his behalf. Uncles, brothers, if we come upon any inconvenience, please help us, for my father and I have only each other to rely on. As the Han say, you need your parents at home and your friends outside it. Sorry for the trouble.”

Duan Ling crossed his thumbs, lowered his hands to the side of his waist, and slid his left foot forward, bowing according to Tangut etiquette. At first Wu Du didn’t budge, but upon seeing this, he followed Duan Ling’s example and ducked his head in a small bow.

Duan Ling turned and corrected Wu Du’s posture. “You should always make lots of friends when you leave home,” he said, switching to Khitan. “One more friend means one more person to look after you.”

Chang Pin laughed. “Your Tangut is good.”

“Thank you.”

“Wu Du isn’t Tangut, so I had some concerns he would give you away,” Chang Pin said. “But as long as he plays the part of a simpleton, no one will suspect anything.”

Wu Du widened his eyes slightly and settled his face into a blank expression. Duan Ling laughed so hard he nearly choked. “You’re good at this.”

The look vanished in an instant, Wu Du’s face reverting to his usual cool indifference.

“Mister Chang Pin,” he said. “This isn’t an easy task, you know.”

Chang Pin cupped his hands and bowed. “I’ve truly troubled the two of you. Should you succeed in this mission, His Excellency is sure to grant you all that you desire.”

Wu Du now stood in a casual posture. No longer pretending to be a simpleton, he now moved with a lofty air about him. “I have only one

wish," he said lightly. "Why don't you grant it to me now?"

"I don't see any harm in hearing it."

"You must be aware of what Wang Shan and I are to each other," Wu Du said. "I don't want to hear His Excellency speak of finding any wife for Shan-er."

Chang Pin was taken aback—but no more so than Duan Ling himself, who flushed bright red in an instant. To think this was the boon Wu Du had in mind.

But Chang Pin seemed to understand. "The prime minister has good intentions, but since you've come out and asked, I'll take care of it. Now, let us go."

Duan Ling and Wu Du mounted Skychaser while Changliu-jun and Chang Pin followed, each on their own steed. Together they headed for Luoyan. By sunset, they arrived at the ruined city of Anxi, where they spent the night.

The following day at dawn, Wu Du found a shabby cart and hitched Skychaser to it for them to continue on their way. Finally Duan Ling could sit for a good, long rest.

By sunset on the third day, they reached the outskirts of Luoyan.

"Mister Chang Pin, now's the time to tell us: How do we get into the city?" Duan Ling asked. They had stopped on Mount Luoyan, looking down into the city from above.

To the north, the plains stretched as far as the eye could see, running all the way to the Great Wall. If one were to travel in the opposite direction, along the southwest road, they would reach Yubi Pass in around four hundred li, and eventually Tong Pass beyond that. The city of Luoyan proper abutted the mountains on three sides and was only open to the north. It was for this reason that the frontier city became so frigid every winter.

The dark scatter of a Mongol encampment nearly fifty thousand strong filled the plains to the north. Banners flapped wildly on the night wind, the first signs of the battle that could break out at the slightest pressure.

“This is as far as I go,” Chang Pin said. “Once you’re past the gates, Changliu-jun will find a way to sneak in as well to provide support. In the meantime, I’ll go back to Ye. If you have any messages to pass along, I’ll carry them.”

Suddenly remembering that Fei Hongde was waiting for them in Ye, Duan Ling informed Chang Pin of this new development.

“Sir, you shouldn’t go off on your own,” Changliu-jun insisted.

“If you bring me with you, you won’t be able to get into Luoyan,” Chang Pin replied. “There’s no difference whether I stay here or go on to Ye. In fact, it’ll be less dangerous for me to wait for you there.”

Zheng Yan’s still in Ye too, Duan Ling thought. *It really is the safest place.* If Chang Pin tried to hide in Mount Luoyan while they worked, it would put him far too close to the Mongol encampment; he might be discovered at any time by their scouts.

Changliu-jun still looked uncertain.

“His Excellency requested that the old man be fetched back to the capital,” Chang Pin reminded him. “Changliu-jun, you should know what our priorities are here.”

Following a long period of consideration, Changliu-jun nodded resolutely.

“As soon as you locate him, bring him back with you. Do not delay for a single moment,” Chang Pin said.

When he was satisfied that Changliu-jun had confirmed his orders, Chang Pin pulled Duan Ling aside and whispered almost soundlessly into his ear, “The old man is surnamed Wang. He’s a Han man, eighty-three years of age, blind, with no children. Remember this well.”

Duan Ling was even more confused upon hearing this description. Who was this man supposed to be? Was he using some kind of alias? Now he understood Chang Pin’s reservations about sending Changliu-jun to search for him. With only a surname, where would they even begin? Truly, their only option was searching the refugee name register line by line.

“Understood,” Duan Ling said, reining in his curiosity. If he really found their mysterious quarry, it wouldn’t be hard to figure out his real

identity.

“Is there anything else you want to ask?”

“Sir, if you could please explain how to properly enter a city as tightly guarded as this one.”

Chang Pin gazed out at the encampment on the plains, his lips curving in a smile. “Naturally, there are ways. Do you see that prisoner camp over there?”

In fact, Duan Ling couldn’t see anything in the dark, but Chang Pin began laying out his plans. When he was through, he bade them goodbye. Duan Ling whispered to Skychaser that he should follow Chang Pin back to Ye. Skychaser wasn’t a steed who’d allow just anyone on his back, so Duan Ling tied his reins to Chang Pin’s saddle so he could gallop along beside him.

Wu Du led the way as he and Duan Ling approached the prisoner camp under the cover of darkness. After dismounting just outside the camp, he hauled a cloth bundle onto his back, peeking through the gaps in the barred wall as he walked past.

“Who’s there?” a Mongol soldier barked. He’d been discovered immediately.

Wu Du waved his hands and made a few incoherent sounds at the soldier. By the time Duan Ling ran up and tried to pull him away, they were surrounded.

Duan Ling launched into his explanation in rapid Tangut, pleading to the soldiers that he and his father were there to do business and asking everyone to have a civilized conversation. Yet he’d hardly gotten halfway through before the soldiers yanked away his belongings and searched him.

Wu Du eyed the soldier who put his hands on Duan Ling with caution, afraid he would notice how beautiful he was and try and strip him. In no time at all, the soldiers had bound their hands and detained them. No normal rope could hope to contain Wu Du—if he’d wanted to, he could’ve snapped it in an instant. Thankfully, however, the Mongols hadn’t gotten a clear view of Duan Ling in the darkness and merely thought they’d come across some easy pickings.

They were marched before the west camp's arav jurtchi—a leader of ten men. Wu Du feigned a panicked expression while Duan Ling pleaded for mercy in broken, semi-coherent Mongolian. Eventually the commander lost his patience and waved for the guards to take them away.

Without further ado, the guards opened the barred door of the prisoner camp and kicked them inside.

Most of the hostages were asleep and didn't stir at the noise. Only a few peered warily over. Wu Du pretended to struggle as they made their way to a corner, where he sank down against the stake fence and cleared a spot for Duan Ling to rest against him.

"Get some sleep while we wait for Changliu-jun," he whispered. "Is the rope hurting your wrists?"

"We got in," Duan Ling whispered back. "I'm fine."

As dawn paled the horizon, the prisoners—all men—began to murmur among themselves, grumbling and bemoaning their situation. Duan Ling struck up a conversation with them in Khitan and learned that many had been caught while trying to flee Luoyan.

When the men asked where he and Wu Du had come from, Wu Du didn't speak a word; Duan Ling responded that he and his father had come to Luoyan to do business, but were seized by the Yuan army when they approached. No one doubted him.

Duan Ling noticed a Khitan man covered in weeping wounds curled up at the edge of the crowd. Something about him seemed familiar, though Duan Ling couldn't quite put his finger on where he'd seen him before.

"What happened to him?" he asked.

"He's sick," a middle-aged man replied.

Duan Ling shifted over to the injured man and nudged him. "What's your name?"

The man was unresponsive, burning with a high fever. His hair was loose on the ground, and he wore dirty Khitan robes. The longer Duan Ling looked at him, the more convinced he became that he knew him from somewhere. He asked all the prisoners around them who he was—but no one had ever seen him before.

“He’s got one foot in the grave.” The middle-aged man sighed. “Don’t waste your efforts on him.”

The man who spoke was named Shen Chong, a Luoyan official who’d received advance news that the Mongols were coming to attack the city. He’d attempted to flee with his family, only to run straight into their army. After his capture, they’d made him send letters back into Luoyan asking for ransom money—but what money did he have? Without a paid ransom, he had been locked up this whole time.

Duan Ling drifted back over to Wu Du’s side.

Recognize him? Wu Du wrote on his palm.

He met Wu Du’s gaze with uncertainty in his eyes, frowned, and shook his head. *Why isn’t Changliu-jun here yet?* he wrote back.

Tonight, Wu Du traced on Duan Ling’s palm with a long, slender finger, then squeezed his hand.

As he leaned back against Wu Du’s chest, Duan Ling’s stomach gurgled, but there was nothing he could do about it. The Yuan guards waited until evening to spill a bamboo basket of beans onto the camp grounds as if sprinkling feed for chickens.

When the prisoners saw the beans, they scrambled forward on hands and knees, eating the beans directly off the ground.

Duan Ling and Wu Du watched in silence. A moment later, the same guard came back with a bucket and splashed water inside the wooden bars. The prisoners all opened their mouths, trying to catch a few drops. Duan Ling’s throat was so parched he felt as if it would go up in smoke. *This mission is positively inhumane,* he thought. If Changliu-jun didn’t come for them tonight, Duan Ling was going to strike his palms with a ruler when they got back.

The day wore down like just that, and the hostages gradually settled into quietude. Duan Ling had begun to drift off when a finger jabbed hard into his back. A second later, the ropes around his hands slackened. Changliu-jun had finally arrived.

Chapter 148

“LET’S GO,” Changliu-jun said.

Wu Du snapped his own ropes with ease while Duan Ling rotated his wrists. Changliu-jun went around the encampment, slicing through the hostages’ bindings one by one.

“We’re leaving tonight,” Duan Ling told them. “Hurry.”

As more and more hostages were freed, they whispered among themselves. Duan Ling waved them forward, beckoning for them to follow Changliu-jun, who led the group out of the gate and around one corner after another, back along the path to the stables that he’d cleared of guards beforehand.

“Come on!” Duan Ling said as he mounted a horse and pulled Wu Du up behind him.

They charged out of the camp unnoticed, leading more than a hundred prisoners behind. Riding single file, the Khitan hostages made their narrow escape into the night, galloping hard and fast for Luoyan, spurred by the knowledge that this was their only chance to flee. At last the Yuan soldiers realized what was happening. The prison camp was located on the westernmost side of the encampment. When the alarm gong sounded, soldiers leapt up and gave pursuit, firing arrows into the darkness.

By that time, Changliu-jun had arrived at the city walls with the prisoners.

“See you guys later!” he said, speeding along the base of the wall and disappearing around a sharp turn—leaving the prisoners, Duan Ling and Wu Du mixed into their number, riding hard for the gates.

“Open the gate!” one man hollered.

“Hurry! Open the gate!” the prisoners all began to yell in unison.

This was the first part of Chang Pin’s plan: disguising themselves as prisoners and bringing a group of people into the city for refuge. If they could slip into Luoyan with the crowd, the plan was a success, and the

prisoners would speak on their behalf. If they couldn't, their only remaining option would be to sneak in, hide from the patrolling guards, and wait for a chance to conduct their search in secret.

Amid the cries for help and the rumbling of the opening gates, the pursuing Mongols arrived within a li of the walls, where they skidded to a halt.

"Arrows ready!" came a cry atop the wall.

The prisoners panicked, crowding as close to the base of the wall as they could and staring upward in fear. Fortunately, the arrows were only pointed at the enemy army; none fell on the men trying to flee.

"Open up, open up! This is Lord Shen! Hurry and open up!" the man shouted, running forward and pounding on the gate.

At last, a great creak cut through the darkness, and gears clicked as the side gate opened a sliver. The prisoners shoved past one another in their hurry to get inside, several even tumbling into the moat.

The Mongols, who had never expected their captives to make a break for Luoyan on this particular night, had hoped to run them down; they weren't prepared for an attack on the city gates. They cut their losses and rode back to their camp in retreat.

Wu Du was a protective barrier around Duan Ling, elbowing away other prisoners as they squeezed their way into the city. Before long, all the prisoners made their way through the gates. The familiar young man, still dizzy with fever, had somehow made it this far with the crowd; Duan Ling grabbed him and dragged him into the city.

The second all of the hostages had passed the gates, the pounding of footsteps sounded behind them as two soldiers ran forward to seize Duan Ling.

Chaos broke out in the darkness. Duan Ling's hands were bound with rope once more. The guards dragged him aside and forced him to his knees.

"Ah! Ah!" Wu Du grunted loudly, pushing his way through the crowd.

"Dad! I'm over here!" Duan Ling called out in Tangut.

Wu Du rushed forward and planted himself in front of Duan Ling.

“All Han, over here!” a guard called out in Han.

Amid the uproar, the guards started a head count.

“Bring any Khitan prisoners over here!”

“We’re Tanguts!” Duan Ling shouted while Wu Du made his incoherent noises.

“Over here!”

Soon the Han, Khitan, Tanguts, Semu, and others from various minor tribes in the north were sorted into their respective lines. Just as the commotion began to settle, the sound of hooves approached on the road, and a squadron of soldiers arrived.

“What happened?” their leader asked as he dismounted.

“Sir,” a gatekeeper reported back, stepping forward from the rest. “A hundred twelve prisoners fled back into the city from the Yuan camp. We need to question them in case some are spies.”

As the torchlight fell over the frightened faces of the prisoners, the man’s face became stern.

This must be the commissioner of Luoyan’s city patrol, Duan Ling thought.

Letting anyone into the city while Liao and Yuan were at war was an enormous risk: There was a high chance spies could be mixed among their number. All it took was one word from this man, and the prisoners’ heads would roll.

Wu Du’s palms began to sweat. If the commissioner said *kill them all*, he was prepared to massacre the guards, flee with Duan Ling, and go to ground in the city.

The hostages held their breath, waiting.

Finally, the commissioner said, “Take them away and interrogate them thoroughly—search out any spies.”

Only then did the ragged group sigh in relief. The Khitan had governed the north for many years now; they were far less ruthless than they’d been during the Battle of Shangzi. After the first emperor’s reign, they’d adopted Han systems to govern the Han, encouraging the study of

Han texts among the upper classes. Many Khitan even used Han characters signifying Confucian virtues in their children's names—*ren* for kindness, *yi* for virtue, *li* for custom, *zhi* for wisdom, and *xin* for trust. They were clearly different from the savage killers that were the Mongols.

The commissioner had turned, about to leave, when Duan Ling called out in Khitan, "Sir, there's an injured soldier with us. Is he one of your officers?"

The commissioner approached. Wu Du, catching on at once, nudged the feverish man forward. Though tattered, the robes the young man wore were obviously expensive; he didn't appear to be a commoner. The moment Duan Ling laid eyes on him in the camp, he'd sensed there was more to him than met the eye—and he was right. As soon as the commissioner saw him, he froze in shock.

"Shulü Duan?" he said. "Hurry, bring him to a doctor at once!"

"There's one more…huh? Where'd he go?" Duan Ling looked around for the official called Shen Chong, only to spot him cowering at the back of the crowd.

"Shen Chong?" the commissioner said.

"Commissioner Wen, spare me!" the man cried, his face so white with fear it was as if his soul had left his body. "Please spare me!"

"Bring him too," the commissioner ordered.

Duan Ling hadn't realized Shen Chong would be so frightened. Suddenly, he remembered: *Right, that guy is a Liao official who fled the city before the siege even started. Now he's come back. Of course he would be punished for his dereliction of duty.* This commissioner must far outrank Shen Chong. But even though Liao's bureaucratic system favored military officials, Shen Chong still shouldn't have been this scared.

The commissioner mounted his horse and left with the rest of his squadron, escorting the sick young man and Shen Chong.

The gatekeepers herded each group into a separate room for interrogations. Among the prisoners, only Duan Ling and Wu Du were Tanguts, and they were thus lumped with the Khitan hostages.

When it was Wu Du’s turn to be questioned, Duan Ling answered for him in fluent Khitan, informing the gatekeeper that they were a father and son who’d come to trade furs, and that his father was both deaf and mute. They’d been seized by the Mongols on the road. While they were detained in the prisoner camp, a martial artist had come in the middle of the night and set all the captives free.

This gatekeeper had made a good impression on Duan Ling from the start. He was, after all, someone who clearly cared about the lives of innocent commoners—someone who’d opened the city gates for them without hesitation. A man like that, he thought, must have a good heart.

“Where did you learn Khitan?” the gatekeeper asked. “Your accent sounds like it’s from Shangjing.”

“I went to school in Shangjing for a little while.”

“It hasn’t been easy for you,” the gatekeeper said, putting a heavy stroke beside his name. “Go find yourself some work. There are too many people in the city. We’ve already got our hands full.”

“Of course.”

“Take this slip with you to the Office of Civil Affairs. You can redeem ten days’ worth of rations; that’s the most we can do for you. You’re not to defraud or steal, and if you commit a crime after being granted refuge in the city, you will be given a harsher sentence.”

Smiling, Duan Ling sprang nimbly to his feet and bowed to the gatekeeper. “May the two gods of heaven and earth protect you, sir.”

He’d been blessed with good looks since childhood, and his smile naturally drew people in. He’d reaped the rewards of this his whole life: People tended to avoid creating trouble for him where they could. And so, after he’d answered only the most basic of questions, the gatekeeper stamped the paper and handed him his temporary registry slip, thus marking the beginning of their sojourn in Luoyan.

As they left the city walls behind them, the morning sun rose overhead. The Mongols had had the city surrounded for more than ten days, yet life carried on as usual within the walls. At this hour, stores on both sides of the street were opening their doors for the day’s business.

Wu Du passed a few silver pieces he'd been keeping in his waist pouch to Duan Ling, who exchanged them for copper coins. After buying some beef, he sat with Wu Du beside the river that coursed through Luoyan and quieted his growling stomach. For the time being, all they needed to do was fill their bellies. They could worry about finding a place to stay later.

"Now what?" Duan Ling asked under his breath.

No one nearby was paying them any attention, so Wu Du said quietly, "Let's wait for Changliu-jun to contact us. No rush—but to think Luoyan would let us in, just like that."

"The people here are good and honest," Duan Ling said. "When the Mongols sacked Shangjing and sent a hundred thousand refugees fleeing south into the Central Plains, Luoyan took in everyone who sought shelter."

That frigid winter remained etched into his memories. If it hadn't been for the broken-down temple in the middle of the city, Duan Ling would've been another pile of bones scattered on the plains. This city had once saved his life. If he ever got the chance, he would repay the kindness. He had to hope that Luoyan could stand its ground against the siege.

If they could hold out until winter arrived—until a few snowfalls had come and city walls iced over—it would be much harder for the Mongols to break into the city. They would be forced to return north.

Though the sun was hot, a sighing wind blew through the mountain range; already, there was a chill in the air. Yellow leaves danced in the autumn breeze as Chang Pin urged his horse across a stream, checking his route against a map. He would first approach the Ye soldiers who'd left the city to cut trees and ask them to bring him back with them. If all went to plan, he could set out for Jiang Prefectural City before winter arrived in earnest.

A light rustle nearby turned Skychaser's head. Sensing danger in the dense woods, he jerked against the reins, tugging Chang Pin's steed aside.

"Hyah!" Chang Pin cried, spurring his horse onto the mountain ridge. Leopards and wolves lurked everywhere in this season, stalking their prey. Yet the next cry he heard chilled him to the bone.

It was human.

A man in black robes tumbled down the cliff ahead, landing with a sickening thud; he was followed by another whose skull cracked on impact, spilling his brain matter over the rocks. A third body skidded down the mountain path, tipping over the cliff's edge.

Chang Pin didn't speak a word, let alone demand *Who's there?* He reined his horse to a quiet stop on the road and waited for the other party to present themselves.

Somewhere behind him, leaves crackled as if trod under running feet. A rush of air whistled past, followed by another thud. A fourth body tumbled out of the shrubbery.

"Zheng Yan?" Chang Pin called.

A figure in a set of blue and black martial robes emerged from the woods: Lang Junxia.

"So it was Lord Wuluohou," Chang Pin said with a smile.

"Mister Chang Pin," Lang Junxia greeted him in turn. "It's been a while."

Chang Pin kneed his horse around to face the assassin. "What brings you all the way out here?"

"I'm here for the same reason as you. Where are Wang Shan and Wu Du?"

Chang Pin's brow furrowed as a thousand thoughts raced through his head. It had been the shadow squad on his trail just now—but Wuluohou Mu had made quick work of them. The shadow squad answered to the crown prince, but so did this assassin. Why had Wuluohou Mu killed them? Perhaps he had some agenda of his own and was approaching Chang Pin as a friend rather than a foe.

"They set off for Zhongjing," Chang Pin said, "and entrusted me with a verbal message for His Majesty."

"What message?" Lang Junxia asked with his usual indifference.

"The north is unstable; the situation could change at a moment's notice. I must hurry back to the capital. I thank you for saving my life." He dismounted, cupped his hands, and bowed.

Lang Junxia’s sword was still in his hand. Even after having assassinated four members of the shadow squad, there was scarcely a fleck of blood on him. After a moment of consideration, he sheathed his sword and fell silent.

Chang Pin also stood quietly, waiting for him to speak.

“I presume Prime Minister Mu sent you to Runan in search of something,” Lang Junxia said finally.

His words immediately raised Chang Pin’s suspicions. “Runan? How has my lord come to that conclusion? Well, I suppose I might as well let you in on the matter: I was actually on my way to Zhongjing to find my shishu, Fei Hongde.”

Lang Junxia nodded and hummed noncommittally. “There’s no need to go through so much trouble to dig up old affairs in Runan, Chang Pin. The true crown prince has been beside you all the time. He is Wang Shan.”

Chang Pin’s face drained of color. Before he could recover from his shock, Lang Junxia flicked his sword out of its scabbard and slashed. The tip of the blade slit Chang Pin’s throat with expert precision.

Blood misted the air. Chang Pin’s body seized as he clutched at the gash in his neck. Within moments he dropped to the ground, dead.

“I let you in on this secret before you died so you can rest in peace,” Lang Junxia said flatly to the corpse. “All the best on your journey, Mister Chang Pin.”

Lang Junxia kicked his body off the ledge. The man’s eyes were still open as he tumbled into the bottomless gorge below, landing on an outcrop with a dull thump. The sound echoed, reverberating across the mountains as Lang Junxia threw the shadow squad assassins’ bodies into the abyss after him.

He untied the tether fastening the two horses together. Skychaser eyed him warily. Lang Junxia’s eyes softened as he regarded the warhorse, holding up a hand to beckon him closer. Skychaser didn’t move. Lang Junxia whistled and closed the distance between them, vaulting up onto his back.

Skychaser pranced in place, but in the end, he didn’t throw Lang Junxia off. With a cry, Lang Junxia brought him around and spurred him back in the direction of Luoyan.

Chapter 149

THE AUTUMN SUN beat down on Luoyan from above. Duan Ling slept curled in Wu Du's lap by the riverside, his head pillowed against Wu Du's chest. Outside the city walls a great army encircled them, but within, it was serene. Wu Du had worn himself out as well, and dozed against the trunk of a willow with Duan Ling in his arms. Although only an afternoon nap caught by the river, it was the most peaceful sleep they'd had since leaving the capital. No matter where the shadow squad might be hiding, it would be nearly impossible for them to enter Luoyan and set an ambush.

Duan Ling woke at sunset with a joint-popping stretch. Wu Du was sleeping soundly, his head slumped on Duan Ling's shoulder like a child's. As soon as Duan Ling jostled him, he blinked his bleary eyes open.

In this comfortable half-asleep state, Duan Ling nearly leaned in and kissed him—but when he remembered Wu Du was supposed to be his father, he was afraid they would be seen. He made do with nuzzling against his neck.

"Let's find a proper place to stay for the night," Wu Du whispered.

"Don't forget you're supposed to be mute," Duan Ling reminded him.

Wu Du had indeed almost forgotten.

He and Duan Ling walked into the city until they found an inn, where they put down a deposit for a room with some of the last of their silver. They didn't plan to stay in Luoyan for long; it didn't matter if they spent all their money.

They'd barely settled into the room when three raps sounded on the window—Changliu-jun's signal. Duan Ling pushed the frame outward, and Changliu-jun slipped into the room, removing Flashblade and a cloth bundle he'd hidden in his robes and setting them on the table.

"These are yours," he said. "Hurry up and find this guy so we can leave."

He turned around and fell onto the bed.

“What are you doing?” Wu Du asked, baffled.

“Going to sleep. I haven’t slept since yesterday.”

Wu Du almost lost it on the spot. Duan Ling quickly gestured for him to lower his voice, lest the other guests hear a mute man speaking through the walls.

“Where else would I sleep?” Changliu-jun asked.

“We’ll leave you the room then,” Wu Du told him.

“Hey, wait, no,” Changliu-jun whined, getting to his feet.

If Wu Du told the attendant they didn’t want the room, he would surely come up and clean it—and if he found another guest squatting inside, he would most certainly kick them out.

“Let’s just get a second room,” Duan Ling said.

They had no choice but to do just that; Wu Du and Duan Ling moved to the second room, while Changliu-jun stayed in the first. Changliu-jun told them to make sure the inn staff didn’t bother him—grumbling what sounded like *this lord needs his beauty sleep*—before firmly shutting the door.

Wu Du rummaged through the bag Changliu-jun had brought, unpacking a set of stealth robes slightly too big for him—likely borrowed from Changliu-jun.

“I’ll go out and take a look around the city clerk’s office tonight,” he said, fastening his sash. “You should rest up for now.”

Duan Ling was starting to feel sleepy again, so he hummed in assent and climbed into bed. Wu Du changed into the close-fitting stealth robes and donned a mask. As he lowered his head, Duan Ling reached out and lifted the mask just enough to reveal Wu Du’s lips. He kissed that resolute curvature, lingering for a moment before reluctantly pulling away.

Wu Du leapt out the window. He rapped on Changliu-jun’s window frame three times as he passed and received an answering knock in return.

Duan Ling tossed and turned in the inn bed, unable to sleep.

Deep in the night, a clamor broke out in the distance, and he was dragged back to that night in Shangjing, years ago.

What's happening?

He shot up in bed. From the far end of the street came the rallying cries of soldiers.

"Changliu-jun!" Duan Ling rushed over to the wall, slapping it to get his attention. He turned back around only to come face-to-face with the man himself, standing in the doorway wearing only a pair of white underpants and a bored expression on his face.

It was the first time Duan Ling had ever seen Changliu-jun with no clo—no *assassin* clothes, and he was so unused to the sight he almost didn't recognize him. "What's going on outside?" he managed to ask after a moment.

"Probably doing drills." Changliu-jun walked in with bleary eyes, plopped down on Duan Ling's bed, and went back to sleep.

"I'm going to go take a look," Duan Ling said.

"Are you trying to get killed?"

This shut Duan Ling up for a minute. But as the shouting outside grew louder, he stuck his head out the window again. "There's a fire."

Changliu-jun hummed, turned over on the bed, and continued dozing.

"A fire!" Duan Ling said urgently. "What should we do? Has Luoyan been breached—are the Mongols attacking?"

The Yuan army had indeed launched an attack that night and somehow made their way into the city; in no time at all, the flames had spread all over the southeast of Luoyan. Household after household was startled awake by the clamor. Seeing the chaos edge ever closer to the inn, Duan Ling grew increasingly agitated.

"Changliu-jun! Get up!"

"Go to sleep. Don't be a nuisance."

Duan Ling didn't know what else he could say. He picked up the other set of stealth robes and threw them at Changliu-jun. "The Mongols are inside the city!"

"You sure?"

"Positive," Duan Ling said.

He had lived through this too many times; he could guess the situation at a glance. The soldiers had breached the city, but not many of them—they were setting fire to all the buildings they could to throw the city into a panic. In the streets below, a brigade of Mongols clashed with a group of Khitan soldiers. Stray arrows careened in every direction. Duan Ling had just poked his head out the window again when Changliu-jun looped an arm around his waist and dragged him backward.

Barely a moment later, a Yuan soldier barged into the inn. Sharp cries issued from the floor below. Changliu-jun, now forced to abandon his rest for good, climbed out of bed and tugged on a white inner shirt. The sounds of wood splintering echoed down the hall as doors were kicked in one by one, each crash followed by a shrill scream.

When Duan Ling heard those cries, his blood boiled; he cast around the room for a weapon, ready to charge out. Changliu-jun unsheathed Sunstreak. When footsteps approached on the other side of the door, he thrust his sword straight through it.

A hoarse scream echoed through the corridor.

Changliu-jun jerked Sunstreak back and delivered a second stab. No more sounds came from outside.

"Okay," he declared. "*Now* we can go back to sleep."

"Sleep?" Duan Ling exclaimed, flabbergasted. "We need to go!"

"Go where?" Changliu-jun said, equally baffled.

"Away from here, at the very least."

"You're not going to wait for your man?" Changliu-jun asked.

He had a point—but given the state of things in the city, what choice did they have? The cacophony of slaughter in the streets was growing louder by the minute. He couldn't bring himself to stand aside and watch as the calamity spread through Luoyan.

"Come on!" Duan Ling shouted, throwing the room's door open to a fiery blaze. An oil lamp had tipped over in the struggle earlier, and fire was licking along the inn's floorboards.

Two Yuan soldiers were slumped dead outside their room, but more were swarming down below. Duan Ling plucked a bow off one of the

soldiers and slung the man's quiver across his back. Changliu-jun jumped onto the stairway banister and slid down, leaving a trail of screams behind him and littering the stairway with the bodies of soldiers trying to climb to the second floor.

Duan Ling nocked an arrow, drew back the bowstring, and shot directly through the forehead of a Yuan soldier charging into the main hall. He ran out of the inn, emerging onto a blazing street. The Mongols were streaming into the city from the east gate now as well.

Wrapping an arm around Duan Ling's waist, Changliu-jun nimbly scaled the wall and stepped onto the roof tiles. The pair dropped onto a balcony on the second floor of the tavern across the street.

"Wait here," Changliu-jun told him. "I'm going to take a look around."

Now that he was equipped with a weapon, Duan Ling was no longer afraid. Changliu-jun sprang across the rooftops toward the highest peak he could find, a pagoda a few buildings away. He gazed out over the city, then climbed up onto the pagoda's roof. The whole street outside the inn was burning, the flames leaping from building to building. Duan Ling, spotting a lone Mongol cavalryman galloping after the fleeing citizens below, took aim and shot the soldier off his horse.

Amid the chaos in the street, a trim figure dressed in black ran out into the open, looking frantically around.

"Wu Du?" Duan Ling recognized him at once. "Over here!"

His shouts were drowned out by the cries below. Wu Du ran back toward the flames engulfing the inn. There was no time to call after him again; Duan Ling loosed an arrow, which sailed through the fire and nailed itself into a pillar right in front of Wu Du. He whipped around, finally spotting Duan Ling on the balcony.

Wu Du tore across the street and vaulted up to the second floor. Panting, he checked Duan Ling over for injuries, his eyes bright with fear.

"You scared me half to death. Why are you here by yourself?" he scolded.

Smoke and ash had blackened his face, but Duan Ling paid it no mind as he pulled his mask down to kiss him. Wu Du wrapped him in a tight hug. “Luoyan’s been breached,” he said. “The Khitan army is trying to contain the invasion.”

“What happened?”

“The Mongols launched a surprise attack. They found a route inside somehow and burned down the post house in the eastern district,” said Wu Du.

Changliu-jun leapt down from the pagoda’s roof.

Wu Du scowled. “Why weren’t you with him?!”

“Nothing was going to happen,” said Changliu-jun. “He’s got the White Tiger Sect’s heirloom and he can use a bow. What are you so afraid of?”

Scooping Duan Ling into his arms, Wu Du jumped down onto the street.

“Let’s check out the western district, c’mon,” Duan Ling said, recalling the temple he’d sheltered in when he’d fled Shangjing.

If it was still there, it was likely where the Han refugees from Anxi had congregated. But the Mongol soldiers were presently streaming into the city from that direction. Wu Du stopped in his tracks and thought. “Too dangerous. We need to get out of the city.”

“We should at least try and get to the western district first,” Duan Ling replied. “If we don’t find the old man there, then there’s nothing more we can do.”

The west gate was where Luoyan had been breached first. The Yuan army had scouted the gate under the cover of night, killing the gatekeepers and allowing soldiers to swarm through in droves. The Khitan army fought back with all its might, sending wave after wave of soldiers to block their progress. Horses, their riders long lost, galloped toward the two from within the chaos. Wu Du caught one by the reins and leapt into the saddle, pulling Duan Ling up after him. Together, they rode for the west gate.

Terrified citizens streamed past them on all sides. A blind, elderly man wouldn’t be able to run like this. If he was here, Duan Ling was certain

he would take refuge near the temple. It was their last hope of finding him.

“Charge!” a soldier bellowed in Khitan.

The Khitan forces charged the Mongols in the streets, and Wu Du swerved his horse the other direction. Duan Ling looked back to see a young general, covered from head to toe in steel-plated armor, leading a Khitan battalion headlong toward the Mongol army.

The enemy had the advantage of numbers. The Yuan soldiers met the Khitan charge with shields raised, and the two forces tore into one another. Wu Du, realizing they couldn’t possibly ride through, left the horse behind and led Duan Ling up to the second floor of a nearby building. From there, they leapt up onto the eaves.

Changliu-jun had disappeared at some point in the chaos. Duan Ling glanced at the street below, where the Mongols were shoving the Khitan army back again and again. The young Khitan general swayed unsteadily on his horse, unable to fend off the repeated assaults. A soldier by his side surged forward to take his place, lifting a shield to fend off the Mongols’ incoming arrows.

A roar shook the Yuan battalion. A Mongol soldier barreled out, cutting a bloody path toward the general.

Before he could think, Duan Ling drew his bow and loosed an arrow that arced through the night like a shooting star. The charging Yuan soldier had just swung his anti-cavalry saber high when Duan Ling’s arrow punched through his left eye. He let out a terrible cry and faltered, the flat of his blade crashing against the young general’s armor.

Changliu-jun appeared on the roof beside them. “Ignore all that—let’s go!”

“No, wait!” Duan Ling said.

The young Khitan general had slumped over the back of his horse. Seeing more Yuan soldiers swarm him from the sides, Duan Ling drew again. The arrow flew from his bowstring, cutting a path through the Mongols’ line as the general and his horse tore through.

The general’s helmet toppled off and rolled into the street. He seemed to be barely breathing. Judging by the quality of his armor, he had to be

someone of importance in the city.

Duan Ling and Wu Du dropped back onto the street. Duan Ling grabbed for the reins of the general's steed to guide the horse toward an alley. The young man, weighed down by his thirty pounds of steel armor, slipped from the saddle with a heavy thud.

"Hey! Are you okay?" Duan Ling asked, shaking him.

The young general's hair was loose; after being struck by the anti-cavalry saber, he seemed dizzy, his eyes unfocused. As Duan Ling got a clear look at his face, it was as if a bolt of lightning struck him.

"Duan Ling?" the general murmured, then fainted dead away.

Chapter 150

Y*ELÜ ZONGZHEN?!* *What in the world is he doing in Luoyan?!*

“You know him?” Wu Du asked.

“I…” Duan Ling was momentarily stunned. More Mongol soldiers charged down the main street, and Wu Du drew his sword, cutting two down in a single slash. As more fighting broke out around them, Duan Ling called, “We have to bring him with us! Hurry!”

They carried Yelü Zongzhen into an alleyway and kicked down a back-courtyard gate. The house was already empty—presumably, all the occupants had fled. Wu Du stood guard while Duan Ling stripped Yelü Zongzhen’s armor to examine him.

Although he had no visible injuries, blood dribbled from his nostrils from the colossal force of the anti-cavalry saber’s strike. The blow had left a dent in his helmet.

“Do you have any needles? I only need two.”

Wu Du rummaged through his pockets and handed him two silver needles, staring at Yelü Zongzhen.

“He’s the Liao emperor,” Duan Ling explained.

Wu Du was silent.

Duan Ling first placed one needle, stabilizing energy flow in his meridians, then inserted the other slowly behind his ear and rotated it between his fingers, moving with extreme care.

“What technique are you using?” Wu Du asked. “Watch out; don’t stick it in randomly.”

His dad had told him that sometimes, if a soldier fell from his horse during battle and hit his head on the ground, he would pass out. The impact caused bleeding in his head, and if the blood wasn’t drained from behind the ear, it would solidify into a plug that would lead to vomiting and unconsciousness.

“It’s fine,” Duan Ling told him. “This is an emergency measure.”

Sure enough, when he withdrew the needle, the blood that had pooled in Yelü Zongzhen’s head flowed out. Duan Ling sat him up, leaned him against the courtyard wall, and patted his cheeks to rouse him.

Yelü Zongzhen had grown up too. He’d still been a boy the last time Duan Ling had glimpsed him in Shangjing, but now, the muscular body beneath his armor was no less defined than any general’s. Evidently, he hadn’t let his riding and archery skills rot over the past two years. Quite the opposite: He’d likely applied himself more passionately than most.

“Zongzhen,” Duan Ling said quietly.

Yelü Zongzhen’s tightly knit brows smoothed out by degrees. Seeing him again filled Duan Ling with a strange mix of feelings. He felt guilty for his part in the Mongols’ attack and sorry to see him in his current state—but above all, he felt grateful for the provisions that Zongzhen had sent to Ye not so long ago.

Duan Ling poured some herbal powder onto his open wound to staunch the bleeding.

“The Khitan soldiers are heading this way,” Wu Du said, peering down the alleyway.

“Let’s go, then.”

They had no choice but to leave Zongzhen behind. Duan Ling had already started forward when Wu Du waved to signal that they couldn’t take the same gate. Looping one arm around Duan Ling’s waist, Wu Du leapt onto the courtyard wall with him, then gathered Duan Ling up in his arms and ducked them into the shadows of the second floor.

The cries outside gradually died down as the Khitan army turned the tide of the battle, forcing the Yuan army to retreat. Knowing their emperor was watching, the Khitan soldiers had thrown all caution to the wind, tightening their line of defense and driving a Mongol host many times their size back out through the west gate. Meanwhile, Yelü Zongzhen’s imperial guards ran into the courtyard with torches lifted. Finding their emperor injured and unconscious, they ran off in a panic to fetch a stretcher to have him carried away.

The first rays of dawn fell upon the face of an old friend as the guards bustled about him. Duan Ling was thrown back to the time they'd spent together, a lifetime ago.

"Were you good friends?" Wu Du asked.

"We only met a few times," Duan Ling told him.

Changliu-jun appeared again, whistling at them from the rooftop across the street.

"Come on," Wu Du said. "Better not let Changliu-jun find out."

There was a chilling thought—but Duan Ling had no time to respond. He and Wu Du jumped down to the ground and headed for the temple to search for their quarry.

They arrived too late: The run-down temple Duan Ling had once stayed in was already burnt to a husk, bodies trapped beneath the smoldering brick and tile. Changliu-jun joined them on the street, and the three of them looked around. Duan Ling trudged forward, his heart burdened with heavy thoughts.

Groans and cries surrounded them. Changliu-jun and Wu Du moved aside fallen poles and timber, saving a great number of citizens trapped beneath them.

"He's not here," Changliu-jun said. "And the sun's almost up. What should we do?"

Duan Ling and Wu Du were supposed to be a pair of father and son Tanguts. Presently, Wu Du was clad in dark stealth robes and a third man—Changliu-jun—was inexplicably accompanying them. They were sure to draw the attention of the Liao army if they carried on like this. The Khitan had just fended off the Mongols, and patrolling soldiers still occasionally raced past them as if possessed, searching for any invaders left inside the walls. The search would spread through the entire city soon, and if they caught the soldiers' attention now, their disguises wouldn't hold up.

"Let's go back to the inn and change, then take our time to come up with a plan," Duan Ling said.

Changliu-jun vanished down the alleyway in a flash, but Wu Du hesitated.

“Find somewhere to hide for a bit. Follow me, but keep out of sight,” Duan Ling said.

Wu Du nodded. Turning away, Duan Ling walked back into the main street, leaving the run-down temple behind.

Yelü Zongzhen’s youthful, heroic face floated again to the surface of his mind. Back then, he’d wanted to take Duan Ling with him to Zhongjing, but they’d lost contact after the Yuan army attacked Shangjing. Was he doing well now? And after such a brief encounter, would he remember whom he had seen before he passed out, or would he simply think he’d hallucinated Duan Ling?

Most importantly—what was he doing in Luoyan?

Duan Ling’s head was so cluttered with questions that, without noticing, he wandered off the street and arrived at the rear gate of an apothecary shop. Looking up, he realized it was the same shop where he’d once taken refuge. Two years had passed since he’d last walked these streets, but now, he’d unconsciously followed his own footsteps here again.

“Changliu-jun!” Duan Ling called out.

“He already went back.”

It was Wu Du who answered. He’d stepped out onto the eaves and was now sitting on his haunches, gazing down at Duan Ling.

Duan Ling had only wanted to see whether Changliu-jun was still hanging around, so it was just as well that he’d left. He pondered for a moment, then said to Wu Du, “I want to look around inside.”

“What is this place?” Wu Du asked.

“A shop where I lived for a while,” Duan Ling said. “When I stopped over in Luoyan on my way to Xichuan.”

“Go on in,” Wu Du said. “I’ll stay outside and keep watch.”

Duan Ling stepped through the alleyway gate and rapped on the door. It wasn’t locked, so he pushed it open onto an empty hall littered with papers and junk.

Time truly did take its toll everywhere. The apothecary and his family had abandoned the shop. Yet when Duan Ling peered into the woodshed

he'd once slept in, he found it to be exactly the same.

Wu Du jumped down into the courtyard and began poking around.

"This used to be my spot," Duan Ling told him, smiling faintly.

"During that winter?"

"Mm-hmm," Duan Ling murmured.

He still felt a sense of gratitude toward this city. He and Wu Du strolled through the courtyard toward the front gates. Chunks were missing from the reception desk, and all the medicine drawers had been removed from the shelves on the wall.

"The owner probably fled," Duan Ling said.

"Doesn't seem like it. Look."

Distracted by their conversation, Duan Ling almost tripped over a heap of rags on the floor. He froze, scared out of his wits: A person was lying in the pile of junk gathered behind the front desk.

Wu Du burst out laughing at his reaction.

As Duan Ling recovered, he realized the man must be a vagrant. "Let's go," he said, not wanting to disturb the stranger.

The man had already woken from the commotion. He trembled as he sat up and reached for a chipped porcelain bowl by his makeshift bed. He picked it up and groped around the floor with his other hand. Duan Ling fished a coin from his breast pocket and tossed it into the beggar's bowl.

"Thank you…" the elderly man said upon hearing the clatter of the coin.

Duan Ling was struck by a strange sense of familiarity—where had he heard that voice?

"Gramps—" he began.

"Oh rich lord traveling the lands, would you please do me a charitable deed? Take some pity on this old man with nothing and no one to rely on…"

All at once, that hoarse voice threw Duan Ling back to that fated, snowy night in Runan.

“Wontons! Get your wontons!”

He froze in place, trembling from head to toe.

“What is it?” Wu Du asked.

“Open the door,” Duan Ling said, his voice quavering.

Instead, Wu Du stepped onto the front desk, then leapt onto a roof beam to jab a hole through the tiles above. Debris showered down, pattering over the floor as sunlight streamed in and set the drifting dust aglow.

Duan Ling slowly lowered himself down on one knee and stared at the old man, stricken. Sensing movement near him, the blind old man raised his head. A stench wafted from his body. Beside him was a bed made of a straw mat and a tattered cotton wad. It was apparent he’d made his home here. The Yuan and Liao armies had been fighting barely a street away, yet somehow, no one had come into the apothecary.

“Qi… Mister Qi?” Duan Ling’s shaking voice sounded foreign to his own ears.

The elderly man got to his feet. Wu Du slapped a hand over Duan Ling’s mouth and dragged him down behind the front desk.

“Wh-who’s there?” the blind old man asked, now shaky as well.

“Don’t say any more,” Wu Du whispered into Duan Ling’s ear.

Duan Ling was stupefied. This was the elderly man who’d once sold wontons in the alley outside the Duan residence. He’d completely forgotten the elderly man’s surname; the kids had all used to shout *Mister Qi! Mister Qi!* and Duan Ling had copied them, calling him by the same name. Rumor held that he’d sold wontons in Runan his whole life. At that moment, the task Chang Pin had entrusted to him and the old man before him finally connected in Duan Ling’s head: The target Chang Pin had sent him after was the old wonton seller, Wang Qi!

“He…he’s—”

“Shh.”

Wu Du turned him around and guided him back out of the shop into the alley. Only once they were outside did he lean in, putting his ear to

Duan Ling's lips while gesturing for him to speak quietly in case the man overheard them. The blind tended to have sharp ears.

Duan Ling relayed the story to Wu Du in a low whisper: how he'd initially assumed the old man must be a member of the Duan family; he had never considered they might be looking for Wang Qi. But this proved Mu Kuangda harbored suspicions about the crown prince. Maybe Amugu's accusations on the night he'd escaped had prompted him to investigate the prince's past, and he'd sent Chang Pin in search of clues.

Everything was clear now, but he was so nervous he couldn't stop trembling. "What do we do?"

"We let Changliu-jun bring him back to the capital," Wu Du said. "But you have to stay away from him."

As he thought back to just a moment ago, a cold sweat broke out on Duan Ling's back. If Wu Du hadn't pulled him away, the next thing to come out of his mouth would've been, *It's me, Duan Ling*. Once the old man spoke to Changliu-jun, Mu Kuangda, and Chang Pin, it'd be easy for him to get confused by their questioning and let it slip that he'd met an old acquaintance in the apothecary shop. Duan Ling would be exposed for certain.

Wu Du pondered the matter briefly. "We'll hand him over," he decided.

"To whom?" Duan Ling's mind was completely blank.

"Mu Kuangda. Wait for the right opportunity. When he confronts the crown prince in court with this information, you can come forward."

Duan Ling was still wordless. He had no capacity to think deeply; too many things had happened over the course of the night. His thoughts were frayed, his emotions surging wildly.

"Okay," he said at last, collecting himself. "You're right."

"I'm going to the inn to fetch Changliu-jun," Wu Du said. "We'll proceed just as we planned and have Changliu-jun take him back to the capital."

"But I already said his name," Duan Ling said, worried. "What if he mentions that?"

“It’s fine. We’ll just say we heard it while asking around for him.”

Duan Ling nodded reluctantly, his heart pounding.

Chapter 151

DUAN LING was still breathing too fast. “Then I’ll stay and keep watch or he might walk off.”

“We could bring him with us? I’ll carry him on my back.”

“It’s too conspicuous,” Duan Ling whispered. “You’ll be stopped and questioned by any passing guard.”

“I’ll figure out some excuse if it comes down to it,” Wu Du whispered back. “We can just say we rescued an old man on the street.”

Duan Ling ran a hand over Wu Du’s stealth robes. “Wearing these clothes while carrying an elderly man on your back? There’s no way any patrol would believe you. And if they surround us, you’ll be overwhelmed trying to deal with everything.”

Wang Qi was eighty-three years old. Duan Ling had never imagined he would still be alive. He’d already been over seventy when Duan Ling was in Runan, still hauling wontons on baskets dangling from the pole over his back every day, strolling through the streets and hawking his wares. In the blink of an eye, eight years had passed, yet he had miraculously managed to survive.

“Then I’ll be quick,” Wu Du said.

As the sun rose higher, the Khitan soldiers redoubled their search, going household by household to find any Mongol soldiers hiding within the city. If they waited any longer, it would be difficult for Wu Du to move about unnoticed in his black stealth robes.

“Hurry and go,” Duan Ling told him, turning back to the apothecary shop. He peered through the window. The old man was sitting there in a daze, lost in his thoughts with his begging bowl in his hand.

Wu Du leapt onto the rooftop in a flash, disappearing without another word. The sooner he left, the sooner he would be back.

Duan Ling gathered himself bit by bit. *With a household as big as the Duan family’s, is there really no one left alive? Why is Chang Pin looking*

for Wang Qi and not Madam Duan? Could they have moved the entire household to escape the war and left no clues at all?

Several groups of patrolling guards marched past. Realizing someone would eventually notice him standing there spacing out in the alleyway, Duan Ling walked back out into the street. It hadn't been touched by the fire, and the breakfast shops on both sides had opened as usual. Hot oil sizzled in the shopkeepers' woks, ready to fry and sell crisp golden flatbreads.

Duan Ling crossed the street and bought two steamed buns for Wang Qi, which he stowed in his breast pocket. Looking left and right, he was about to cross the street again when his eye snagged on a figure not far away. A man, travel-worn, stood in the middle of the street holding Skychaser's reins. Duan Ling froze, sure his eyes were deceiving him.

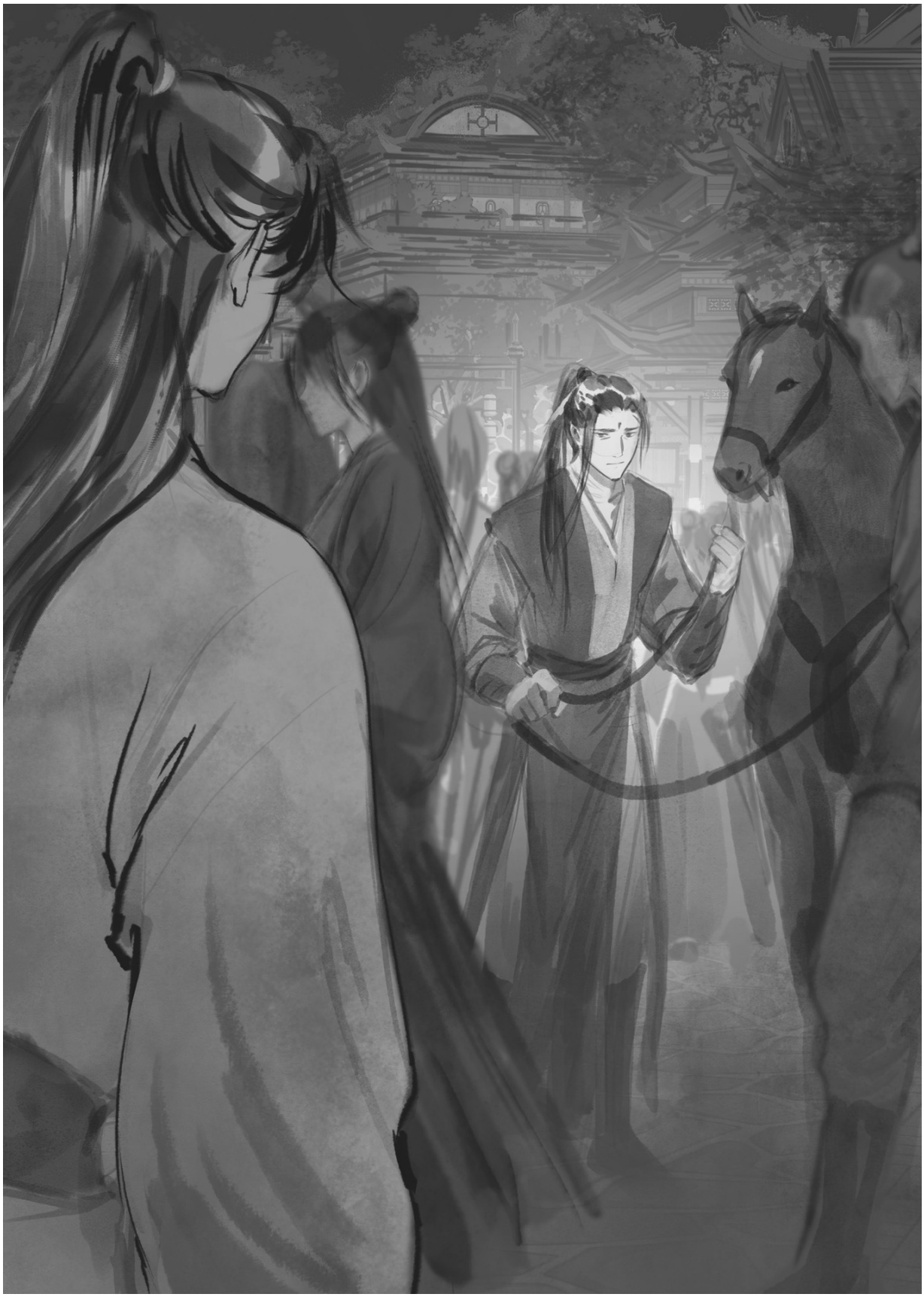
Lang Junxia.

As they stood facing each other, Duan Ling heard a roaring in his ears.

"I finally found you," Lang Junxia said.

This was the third serious shock Duan Ling had suffered in the span of a single day. Every new twist had rattled him to his core—but he had no time to reflect on Lang Junxia's sudden appearance. He made a split-second decision and ran.

Lang Junxia started after him, his strides lengthening into a run.



Duan Ling's only thought was to get away. He couldn't let Lang Junxia catch him, or learn that they'd found Wang Qi. The only saving grace was that Lang Junxia didn't know why he was here. He had to buy Wu Du time.

Their chaotic flight caught the attention of passersby on both sides of the street. "Help!" Duan Ling yelled, running for a crowded area.

Khitan soldiers patrolling the streets whipped their heads in his direction. Duan Ling sprinted straight for them. Lang Junxia dashed after him like a swooping gyrfalcon, closing the distance between them to a mere ten feet.

A horse crossed in front of Duan Ling's path. He glanced back momentarily; Lang Junxia was much faster than him, and before he knew it, the assassin was almost breathing down his neck.

Duan Ling dropped to the ground and rolled beneath the horse's belly. Lang Junxia leapt into the air and sprang off the horse's head, twisting in midair as he drew Chilling Edge. He sliced down; the horse's blood sprayed into the air.

Not daring to look again, Duan Ling scrambled to his feet and dove headfirst into the crowd. Mounted Khitan soldiers closed in from all sides, shouting as they charged at Lang Junxia. Duan Ling ran past them, weaving through the crush. There were at least a dozen soldiers between them now. Lang Junxia, seeing he wouldn't be able to catch him, ducked into a nearby alley and vanished.

As Duan Ling gasped desperately for air, he felt a soldier's hand close over his shoulder. He'd just narrowly escaped a trip to the underworld, but now he was caught by the city patrol. Duan Ling struggled in the man's hands. As long as Wu Du wasn't by his side, he couldn't under any circumstances be left alone, or Lang Junxia would come for him again.

Thinking quickly, he hollered in Khitan, "Take me to Zongzhen! I'm the one who saved his life yesterday!"

Surely Yelü Zongzhen had suspected it was him the day before in the courtyard. If Duan Ling was lucky, the Liao emperor had told the guards he was looking for him, in which case he only needed to say these words to gain an audience.

Just as he'd hoped, the Khitan soldiers around him lapsed into silence. The captain leaned over and relayed an order to one of his soldiers, and they whisked Duan Ling away.

As they walked, Duan Ling prayed Lang Junxia wouldn't find out about Wang Qi's existence, and that Wu Du and Changliu-jun would return quickly—or they'd all be left to the whims of fate.

But why was Skychaser with Lang Junxia? A horrifying thought occurred to him: Had Chang Pin been killed?

The soldiers conducted Duan Ling into the heavily garrisoned city guard headquarters and sat him down to wait while they announced him. Duan Ling was as skittish as a startled deer, sweeping his gaze over the guards around him, wondering if Lang Junxia could break through their defenses to hunt him down. The soldiers here were most likely Yelü Zongzhen's imperial guards. They should be capable of stopping an assassin—otherwise, wouldn't Chen's Four Great Assassins be able to freely kill whomever they wanted?

It wasn't long before Yelü Zongzhen rushed in, chest bare and wearing only a pair of pants. When he spotted Duan Ling, a wordless cry burst from him; he broke into a run and tackled Duan Ling to the ground. Yelü Zongzhen laughed merrily while Duan Ling's face was still pale from fright—but at last, he was safe.

Pressing Duan Ling down against the floor, Yelü Zongzhen gazed into his eyes. "It's really you!" he said in Han, his eyes sheened with tears. "I knew it wasn't a dream. Duan Ling, you came back."

A million different emotions surged in Duan Ling's chest, and he too began to laugh.

Yelü Zongzhen climbed to his feet, pulling Duan Ling up after him.

"Does your head still hurt?" Duan Ling asked.

"A light wound. Not even worth mentioning."

Clutching Duan Ling's hand, he led him into a hall where a brazier had been lit. Duan Ling wanted to ask him to send one of his soldiers to the apothecary to see if Wang Qi was still there and deliver a message to Wu Du, but he was afraid sending anyone from city guard headquarters would

raise Lang Junxia's suspicions—and he was even more afraid the messenger would reach Wu Du when he was with Changliu-jun. Sending for Wu Du directly would reveal that Duan Ling personally knew the Liao emperor, a connection he couldn't easily explain.

Duan Ling pondered the dilemma in silence.

"Zongzhen," he said. "Before you ask any questions, send this with a messenger to Anrong Apothecary, near the western gate." He handed Yelü Zongzhen the acacia-bead bracelet Wu Du had given him. "The messenger should look for a man in Tangut robes with a brown goose feather in his hat. Show him this and ask him to come back here."

Yelü Zongzhen handed the bracelet to a subordinate, ordering him to do as Duan Ling had asked. Then, eyes dancing with mirth, he gestured for Duan Ling to take a seat.

"So I was right all along," he said. "I wrote a letter to your uncle, you know."

"How…did you guess?" Duan Ling asked, instantly nervous.

"Fei Hongde brought me the letter you wrote asking for grain. Remember, I read your essays back in Shangjing; the letter had your words and your writing. Last time we met, you called me 'Your Majesty,' but this time you called me 'Zongzhen.' That was what confirmed my suspicions."

Duan Ling didn't know what to say.

Yelü Zongzhen dismissed the guards on either side of him to give them privacy.

"Tell them to tighten the defenses," Duan Ling said hurriedly. "There's a man after my life."

Yelü Zongzhen's expression turned grave, and he gave orders to the guards outside. They assented, closing all the doors and windows. Footsteps sounded in the corridor: Every guard had taken a position outside a window. Tiles rattled overhead. Duan Ling looked up; there were even three guards stationed on the roof.

"Don't be afraid," Yelü Zongzhen told him. "These men are all my imperial guards. Each one is a skilled fighter who could fend off Helian's entire thirteen-guard entourage, the ones who accompany him at all times."

Duan Ling nodded, letting out a breath at last.

“Don’t you think you owe me an explanation?” Yelü Zongzhen asked with a pointed stare.

Duan Ling returned his gaze, flashing a tired smile. Over these two short years, they had all grown up. Although Yelü Zongzhen hadn’t changed as dramatically as Batu, his eyes now held a resolute dignity more distinct and mature than before.

“Did you plant that peach branch in the imperial garden?” Duan Ling asked.

“I’ll take you there someday. The tree bore fruit this year.”

Duan Ling laughed again, but Yelü Zongzhen merely smiled. After that hearty laugh at the moment of their reunion, his attitude had become more reserved.

“Do you want something to eat?” he offered rather than pressing Duan Ling to give an explanation right away.

“Sure,” Duan Ling said with a sigh, wondering when the soldier who’d left in search of Wu Du would be back.

Yelü Zongzhen called for a meal to be brought. A servant poured Duan Ling a cup of milk tea and presented him with a hefty lamb chop. After starving the whole night, Duan Ling wolfed down the food while Yelü Zongzhen fished out a small knife and cut the lamb for him.

“Wine?” he offered.

Duan Ling shook his head. His mouth was stuffed with food, but there was a tightness in his chest. Swallowing, he said, “I’m exhausted.”

Yelü Zongzhen watched him in silence. Once Duan Ling had filled his stomach, he had no excuse to keep things from Yelü Zongzhen any longer—not to mention that someone as smart as Yelü Zongzhen had likely already guessed the whole sequence of events.

“That year, my dad went south and left me in Shangjing,” Duan Ling began. He relayed in detail all that had happened to him since. Just as he reached the part where he’d arrived in Xichuan, a knock sounded on the door.

“Your Majesty, we brought the man you asked for.”

The guards pushed open the door. The second Wu Du stepped inside, his face darkened.

Oh, good, Duan Ling thought upon seeing him. He signaled for him not to do anything rash.

Wu Du looked Yelü Zongzhen over silently before taking a seat a few places down.

“He’s the one who saved you?” Yelü Zongzhen asked.

“Yes,” Duan Ling said, rising and settling down beside Wu Du. “I can’t go with you.” He looked back at Yelü Zongzhen. “Even though Cai Yan stole my rightful place, I still must go back to the Central Plains. There’s only one path before me.”

“You are the heir of Southern Chen.” Yelü Zongzhen hadn’t shown the slightest sign of shock throughout Duan Ling’s explanation of events. He said with a smile, “That’s just what you ought to do.”

“But what about you?” Duan Ling said. “Why did you come to Luoyan?”

Yelü Zongzhen took a moment to organize his thoughts. “One of Han Weiyong’s ploys,” he said, “in order to kill me. He tricked me into coming here—but now that I consider it, perhaps it was fate. If he hadn’t, I wouldn’t have run into you again. Whenever I come face-to-face with death, you always appear by my side. It seems our paths are fated to cross.”

Chapter 152

“HAN WEIYONG AGAIN?!” Duan Ling exclaimed, knitting his brows.

“A month ago, I planned to make a secret trip to the border of Liao and Western Liang to meet with Helian Bo in Cong County. But the news was carelessly leaked—and on top of that, one of my own subordinates betrayed me. Han Weiyong hid his men along the road, intending to assassinate me on the way.”

Yelü Zongzhen stood with a sigh and paced the hall. Duan Ling could guess why Yelü Zongzhen had sought out Helian Bo: Western Liang was situated between the kingdoms of Liao and Chen, and the battle at Tong Pass had not only established a friendship between the Helian family and the Chen court, but had also opened a trade route between Chen and Western Liang. Additionally, Helian Bo was now connected to the Marquis of Huaiyin via marriage; to strengthen their own ties to Western Liang, the Liao Empire was willing to send their emperor as a demonstration of their sincerity.

What he didn’t know was whether Yelü Zongzhen hoped to win Helian Bo over to his side for the purpose of opposing Han Weiyong—or Southern Chen.

“So the assassins chased you back east,” Duan Ling said. “And Han Weiyong, realizing he couldn’t kill you himself, sold your whereabouts to the Mongols.”

“Exactly,” Yelü Zongzhen said, sitting down again. “Ögedei’s trusted aide, Chaghan, and Yuan’s strongest warrior, Amugu, rode south with their forces and met with the army riding north. When they discovered I was nearby, they pursued us relentlessly; I had no choice but to take refuge in Luoyan. And you—why are you here?”

In response to Yelü Zongzhen’s detailed explanation, Duan Ling offered a scant three words: “Just dropping in.”

This brought a smile back to Yelü Zongzhen's face. "Your neighbor's backyard is on fire and he's too busy trying to put it out to welcome you properly. My apologies that you have to see this mess."

Duan Ling watched him quietly.

Yelü Zongzhen got to his feet. "You've saved my life twice now."

"You already repaid me in full," Duan Ling replied. "Your grain saved the people of Ye. If we're keeping score, it's me who owes you."

"That doesn't count," Yelü Zongzhen said. "After all, we Khitan are relying on you to be our buffer. We're thankful you didn't trade Ye, Hejian, Chang, or any of the surrounding areas to Yuan."

"That was my father's fief when he was alive. Of course we wouldn't trade it away."

"You should get some rest," Yelü Zongzhen said. "Someone's after your life, so I've allocated twenty imperial guards to keep watch over your quarters. You'll be safe here."

"There's no need for that," Wu Du said as he stood as well.

Yelü Zongzhen glanced at him but said nothing. He turned to Duan Ling and gave him a nod, and Duan Ling responded formally with the bow of a foreign envoy. He hadn't missed the trace of disappointment in Yelü Zongzhen's eyes.

Duan Ling had found it strange that Yelü Zongzhen hadn't requested anything from him—was this really going to be it? But upon reflection, there wasn't much Duan Ling could do. He and Wu Du were merely two people within the city, surrounded by the Yuan army outside the walls. What could they do? Besides, Yelü Zongzhen was different from Helian Bo and Batu. Theirs were friendships formed during the hardship of childhood, whereas Duan Ling had only met Yelü Zongzhen when he was already emperor. Considering his status, it was too difficult for Yelü Zongzhen to set his dignity aside and beg for help.

One of Yelü Zongzhen's imperial guards met them outside the hall to lead them to their quarters.

Halfway there, Wu Du stopped in his tracks. Sensing he had something to say, Duan Ling waved to the guard, who stepped back a few

discreet paces to wait.

“Where is he?” Duan Ling asked, remembering Wu Du’s last task.

“Keeping watch at the apothecary shop,” Wu Du responded. “Changliu-jun doesn’t have an exit permit, so he can’t just take an old man from the city. You’ll have to figure something out.”

Duan Ling nodded.

“How’d you end up here?” Wu Du asked with a frown.

By the time Duan Ling had relayed the whole story, Wu Du’s expression was stormy.

“He was leading Skychaser,” Duan Ling said.

“I saw.”

Wu Du had returned to look for Duan Ling, but instead he’d found Skychaser pacing the alleyway. He’d mounted the steed and ridden off to further his search. When he ran into Khitan soldiers on patrol, they’d almost arrested him; thankfully Yelü Zongzhen’s personal guards had reached him at just the right moment and brought him back to headquarters.

“Is Chang Pin dead?”

“Not necessarily,” said Wu Du. “You think Wuluohou Mu would kill him?”

“He must’ve. I bet he ran into Chang Pin on the road and killed him. Skychaser knows him—he’s ridden him before. That’s how he got here. If I had to guess, he entered Luoyan during the chaos when the Mongols attacked last night.”

“Even if he really did kill him, Chang Pin wouldn’t have told him about our mission. How did he know we were in Luoyan?”

“Skychaser brought him here. Skychaser’s smart; he probably saw the army around the city and thought he needed to come back and save me.”

It was a pity that the horse couldn’t speak, or they could simply ask him to explain what had happened.

“Don’t jump to conclusions,” Wu Du said. “Maybe Chang Pin escaped, or maybe Skychaser wouldn’t obey him—he could’ve run off when he untied the reins and encountered Wuluohou Mu on the road.”

“Maybe.”

The entire affair was baffling, so full of loose threads Duan Ling didn’t know where to pull to start sorting it out. “So what do we do next?”

“Get an exit permit and leave the city,” said Wu Du.

Duan Ling frowned.

Sensing his reluctance, Wu Du lowered his voice further. “What are you thinking?”

Duan Ling shook his head.

The furrow between Wu Du’s brows deepened. “Surely you’re not going to help the Khitan emperor defend his city.”

Duan Ling’s face was ashen when he lifted his eyes to meet Wu Du’s. He was well aware of the bad blood between Wu Du’s sect and the Khitan people. Wu Du was already being remarkably considerate taking their larger goals into account and not offing the Liao emperor on sight.

“I was just thinking…” Duan Ling said with great care, not wanting to test the limits of Wu Du’s restraint. “…of staying a little longer.”

But Wu Du was already bristling. “I won’t put my life on the line for a Khitan.”

“I need Zongzhen to survive!” Duan Ling protested. “If he dies, it’ll spell more trouble for Great Chen.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Wu Du. “Yelü Zongzhen will march south one day—that brat’s ambitious.”

“No.” Duan Ling shook his head. “He’s not what you think. Wu Du, trust me.” He peered up at Wu Du again, earnest. “Han Weiyong has already struck two deals with the Mongols—first, he used them to rid himself of Yelü Dashi when they attacked Shangjing, and now, he wants to use them to dispose of Yelü Zongzhen. If Zongzhen dies, Liao will fall squarely under his and Empress Dowager Xiao’s control. What will stop him from cutting a third deal with Yuan and letting them pass through Liao to invade Great Chen?”

A moment of silence elapsed.

“You always win our arguments,” Wu Du said at last. “But I won’t protect the Liao emperor.”

He turned and stalked away.

“Wu Du!” Duan Ling hurried after him. The guard—seeing that they were no longer talking—returned to the corridor, gesturing for Duan Ling to stay close. Wu Du didn’t look back; he leapt onto the wall and disappeared into the night.

Duan Ling froze. “Wu Du!” he cried, panicked.

The guard was also left at a loss. “That, uh…” he said in Khitan.

“He still has some things to take care of,” Duan Ling said, composing himself. “Don’t mind him. I’ll…settle in first.”

“My lord, do you need me to summon any attendants?”

“No.”

Duan Ling entered the guest hall and collapsed onto the bed, taking deep breaths. He had to think. His head was spinning—so much was going on that he couldn’t sort out what was important from what wasn’t, let alone deal with Wu Du’s temper. Still, this was something that demanded serious consideration. No one in the world was dearer to him than Wu Du; their relationship was not that of ruler and subject, but of lovers. Wu Du was not a weapon to be wielded, and Duan Ling couldn’t do what his father had done: command Wu Du to bend the knee and follow his orders without hesitation.

All that education hadn’t been for nothing. He knew a ruler must make his decisions without allowing himself to be swayed by sentiment. *If my father were still alive, what would he do?*

If his father were still alive…he would probably send Wu Du back to Ye with instructions to lead the army here while he stayed in Luoyan and commanded the Liao army alongside Yelü Zongzhen, waiting for the right time to coordinate a two-pronged attack on the Yuan forces.

But he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Even trying to persuade Wu Du to help the Khitan was a challenge.

Maybe I’m not suited to be emperor after all, Duan Ling thought with a sigh, rolling over to face the wall.

Too tired to think any longer, he drifted into sleep.

As the night wore on, a melodious flute song wound through his dream, one he hadn't heard in a long time: "Joyful Reunion."

Duan Ling's eyes snapped open. The player was unmistakably Wu Du.

The bright moon overhead illuminated the frosted courtyard outside. Duan Ling slipped out of bed, stepping onto the floor with bare feet.

He knew Wu Du was reminding him not to forget the grudge of Shangjing, nor the humiliation of losing half their empire. He'd woken with a painful headache, and he vented a lengthy sigh as he settled cross-legged before the low table. The song played on. He listened quietly as figures rose before his eyes, one by one: Lang Junxia, Xunchun, his father.

On the roof, Wu Du leaned against an upturned corner of the eaves, the flute held between slender fingers.

The phantom tune drifted over the night's breezes. A courtyard away, Yelü Zongzhen stepped out into the corridor. "What's the song?" he murmured, following the sound to the gate of Duan Ling's quarters. The melody floated out from within.

The faint notes of the flute faded slowly away. Wu Du spoke from above. "When you ascend the throne, will you seek an alliance with the Liao Empire—form a brotherhood with them?"

"Didn't my grandfather do so?" Duan Ling replied. "And my father too. When the Mongols attacked Shangjing, he formed an alliance with Yelü Dashi. Back then, Xunchun also tried to persuade him not to."

"So you'll follow in their footsteps?"

Duan Ling was left wordless by this demand. Finally he said, "Half the empire is yours. You also have the right to govern. You decide."

Wu Du didn't reply.

Anyone else would've cursed up a storm at Wu Du for his insolence. But no matter how Wu Du forced his hand, Duan Ling couldn't bear to speak harshly to him—because he was Wu Du.

I’m a weak, irresolute crown prince, he thought glumly as he drifted back inside and flopped onto the bed.

Yelü Zongzhen, standing quietly outside, gestured to the guards not to alert his two guests of his presence. After pondering briefly, he turned and left.

Duan Ling lay in bed, thinking again. After a time he got up, put on a robe, and exited the courtyard gates. He glanced up at the roof, but Wu Du was no longer there. Turning away, he paced down the corridor toward the doors of the complex’s study.

“Zongzhen?” he called from outside.

Yelü Zongzhen made a noise of acknowledgment, and his guards pushed the doors open to admit Duan Ling.

It was past midnight, but Yelü Zongzhen was still awake, examining the map laid out on his table. East of Luoyan lay a deep gorge and Runan; southeast from Runan was the Xun River, marking the border between Liao and Chen. Duan Ling’s city of Ye sat on that river’s south bank.

“I need an exit permit,” Duan Ling said.

“You’re leaving?” Yelü Zongzhen’s eyes flicked up from the map to Duan Ling, then settled back on the inked mountains and rivers. “There’s an entire army outside the walls. If you leave now, they’ll capture you.”

Duan Ling realized Yelü Zongzhen was right. Changliu-jun was a skilled fighter, but he was escorting an elderly man. A trained assassin like him could easily cut a path out of the city on his own—but carting along a blind octogenarian was entirely out of the question.

“I’m not going yet,” Duan Ling said. “But I have need of one.”

“Are you planning to lend me reinforcements?” Yelü Zongzhen asked. “I’ve heard you have four thousand men between Ye and Hejian, but even if you dispatched half here, that would be only two thousand swords. You wouldn’t stand a chance against Borjigin.”

A tremor shook Duan Ling’s voice. “He’s in the opposing army?”

“I thought you knew.” Yelü Zongzhen looked up and met his eyes.

Chapter 153

"I…" DUAN LING DIDN'T KNOW where to begin.

"Haven't you already fought with him?" Yelü Zongzhen asked. "And delivered him a heavy blow, from the sound of it. I'm sure he'll remember his crushing defeat outside Ye for the rest of his life."

"Those were Wu Du's accomplishments. It's got nothing to do with…"

Yelü Zongzhen gazed at him in silence as he trailed off. Duan Ling unfolded a piece of paper, placed it before him, and began to grind his ink. Yelü Zongzhen stopped him and called for a guard.

"You shouldn't be doing these menial tasks," he said.

Duan Ling had to hand it to him—from the moment they'd reunited, Yelü Zongzhen had been hiding words within words. But he never took it any further than that; he wouldn't force Duan Ling to a decision.

The sky had begun to lighten by the time Yelü Zongzhen put the last strokes on the exit permit and handed it to Duan Ling. Exhausted, he said, "I'm going to get some sleep. Stay or go, as you wish."

Duan Ling didn't want to go back to his bed. He stayed in the study while Yelü Zongzhen leaned against the low divan behind the table and closed his eyes.

Suddenly, Yelü Zongzhen asked, "Is he good to you?"

"Who?" Duan Ling said on reflex, still thinking of how to persuade Wu Du of his plan. Yelü Zongzhen's question brought him out of his thoughts, and he answered, "Very good. He never refuses me anything."

"You're Li Jianhong's son. No wonder you seemed special when I first met you, like a beautiful piece of jade. But you're not like him—not at all. Li Jianhong never asked for anyone else's opinion if he wanted to do something."

"I never ask for anyone's opinion either," Duan Ling said. "But he's not just anyone."

“What holds more weight for you: his life, or those of your people?” Yelü Zongzhen asked.

“Do you really want the answer?” Duan Ling said, smiling. “Best leave it, or the people will be cursing my name.”

“Just now, when you said that, you were quite like Li Jianhong.”

“You never met my father,” Duan Ling said, still smiling faintly. “How would you know if I’m like him or not?”

“I’ve heard a lot about him. He was from an enemy kingdom, but he was also a legend. In fact, I should probably be exacting my revenge on you. Your dad killed too many of my fellow Khitan.”

“Your Khitan people also killed many of my fellow Han,” retorted Duan Ling. “And you invaded us first.”

“Even before that, you Han killed Khitan in droves on the banks of the Xar Moron River—to the point where we were almost completely wiped out.”

“Well, before that, you Khitan…” Duan Ling fell silent.

“Before that, you say?” Yelü Zongzhen’s lips quirked in a smile.

Duan Ling couldn’t remember. The first appearance of the Khitan in the history he knew was at the great battle on the banks of Xar Moron River.

“Duan Ling, do you have a younger sister?” Yelü Zongzhen asked abruptly.

“No, only an older maternal cousin. But you don’t want to marry her.”

He felt like he’d reached a mysterious understanding with Yelü Zongzhen over the course of their conversation. He hadn’t been imagining the sensation he’d had when they first met: that he and Yelü Zongzhen, in some ways, were entirely alike.

A noise broke in from the corridor outside, and they both turned as a figure flitted past.

“Assassin!” shouted a guard.

The guards massed outside the doors, guarding the study’s occupants.

“Don’t attack,” Duan Ling blurted, thinking it was Wu Du.

“Don’t attack,” Yelü Zongzhen repeated with a smile.

But when a second figure flashed by, Duan Ling instinctively knew *that* was Wu Du. So who was the first man—Lang Junxia?

A subordinate rushed inside and dropped to one knee. “Your Majesty, there was an assassin spying outside the guest quarters. The man was chased away by Your Majesty’s guest’s guard.”

Yelü Zongzhen frowned, piecing the details together. He turned to Duan Ling. “Could it be the man who was trying to kill you on the street?”

“Probably.” Anxiety twisted Duan Ling’s stomach as he considered his next move. He wanted to run after Wu Du, but he didn’t know which direction he’d gone.

“How strong is your guard, compared to that assassin?”

Duan Ling contemplated briefly. “The assassin is no threat to him.”

Yelü Zongzhen nodded, dropping the subject. He hadn’t been boasting about his subordinates either. Already they’d arranged themselves in a protective formation outside. That was just as well; it would be preposterous if it took merely one rogue assassin to kill the emperor of a nation.

“I was thinking,” Yelü Zongzhen said, continuing their conversation from before. “I’d be fine with marrying anyone, so why not you? If you married me, we’d have a world free of conflict.”

“What nonsense,” Duan Ling said, caught between laughter and tears.

“Before we were known as the Kingdom of Liao, we had a male empress.” Yelü Zongzhen smiled. “Whether you rule or I rule, we wouldn’t have all the killing and fighting we have now. I’d be overjoyed to be spared the effort of thinking about governing the country. I could learn songs and poetry from you, and we could lose ourselves in the beauty of the world.”

“And what of the Mongols?” Duan Ling asked. “Are you going to marry Borjigin too and fill up your harem?”

Yelü Zongzhen burst into laughter. “The whole Borjigin clan are barbarians. They pose no real threat.”

“You say it so easily. How about you become my consort instead?”

The Liao emperor’s black martial robes made him seem older than Duan Ling. Though in truth he was only his elder by a fraction, he exuded a sturdy warmth like a friendly older brother, someone who could make anyone feel safe in his company.

“If it meant laying our weapons down, what harm would there be in marrying you?” Yelü Zongzhen said. “But that would be unfair to *your* empress.”

Duan Ling laughed too. Of course they were only joking around. He didn’t feel the same way toward Zongzhen as he did toward Wu Du. Duan Ling liked this young man very much, but he didn’t love him and didn’t have the same strong urge to rely on him that he did with Wu Du.

“I’ll think of a way to break out of the siege,” Duan Ling said.

“After this is behind us, let’s never fight again,” Yelü Zongzhen replied.

“I’m only the governor of Hebei. I can’t decide that.”

“You’ll return to your rightful place,” Yelü Zongzhen said. “That Cai brat is no match for you, not to mention you’ve got Fei Hongde on your side—and while your husband may have a temper, you’re the only thing on his mind. Once I’m safe and sound back in Zhongjing, I’ll dig up some dirt on the Cai family for you. Even if you don’t end up using it, I’ll send everything along to Ye.”

Duan Ling perked up at his words. Yelü Zongzhen might indeed hold critical information about the Cai family. After all, they’d once been part of Liao’s Southern Court; Cai Yan and his brother Cai Wen had both only escaped execution thanks to Yelü Dashi’s protection. There were undoubtedly traces of the Cai clan within the Liao administration.

“Why do you think he did it?” Duan Ling asked.

“I never knew him well,” said Yelü Zongzhen. “But my guess is that he hates your people, the Han. Your grandfather was the one who sowed the discord that saw his father killed, and the one who came up with the plan was Mister Fei Hongde. To have a man who has such bad blood with the

Chen Empire serve as its crown prince is a dangerous thing; perhaps he plans to drag the entire kingdom with him into the abyss."

Duan Ling rose to his feet in silence, ready to leave him to his rest. As he reached the door, he turned back with a final thought. "That day the Mongols invaded Shangjing… Did my father's sword end up in your hands?"

"Sword?" Yelü Zongzhen considered his question. "No. Are you looking for it? I'll ask around for you."

Yelü Zongzhen had no reason to deceive him on this matter, so Duan Ling nodded and left.

It was bright outside now. A freezing gale gusted through the courtyard. Over the course of a single night, a chill had descended over the city. Luoyan was first in the path of the frigid northern winds and therefore the first place winter arrived south of the Great Wall. The ground was covered in a thin sheet of ice, which cracked crisply under Duan Ling's footsteps as he walked down the corridor.

He entered the guest quarters and came to an abrupt stop. Changliu-jun was eating lunch in the courtyard; Wu Du was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Wu Du?" Duan Ling asked.

"Off to kill Wuluohou Mu," said Changliu-jun. "Why is that guy even here?"

"No clue," Duan Ling said, handing him the exit permit. "Wouldn't you know better than me?"

Changliu-jun narrowed his eyes. Duan Ling had volleyed his question back at him, and Changliu-jun was stumped. Why was Lang Junxia in Luoyan? Firstly, why was he, Changliu-jun, in Luoyan? Chang Pin and Prime Minister Mu knew better than anyone else, so perhaps Lang Junxia was here for the same reason—in search of the old man Wang Qi.

"I saw Skychaser in the back courtyard too. Why's he back?" Changliu-jun pressed.

Duan Ling shrugged. *How would I know?*

"I have to leave the city," Changliu-jun said. "Mister Chang Pin might be in danger."

“If he was, it’s certainly too late now,” said Duan Ling. “At least if you help catch Wuluohou Mu, you might be able to get some useful information out of him.”

Changliu-jun wavered for only a moment before rising to his feet. In two great leaps, he ascended the roof and left the courtyard, vanishing in a flash.

“Hey, wait!” Duan Ling called after him.

He hadn’t gotten to ask how Wang Qi was doing. Evidently, Changliu-jun was ditching his escort job. Duan Ling felt a spark of fear at his absence. But the shadow squad shouldn’t have been able to follow them all the way into Luoyan; as a matter of fact, he hadn’t detected their movements for the past month, ever since they’d encountered the assassins outside of Ye.

The only one who posed a threat to him was Lang Junxia, and he was presently being pursued by Wu Du. Duan Ling should be safe here.

He *should* be safe, but he was rattled nonetheless. After spending a moment fretting, he said to the guards, “Please call some of your brothers over to come and sit with me for a while.”

One of the two guards flanking his door left to pass on his request. Inside the hall, Duan Ling stretched. It was much too cold outside, as if winter had swept down in a single night, though there had been strong winds in Luoyan for several days beforehand.

Soon after, a new guard appeared at the gate. It took Duan Ling a second to recall where he’d seen him before—it was the same man he’d saved in the prisoner camp, Shulü Duan. Duan Ling had finally realized why he’d seemed familiar. When Duan Ling had met Yelü Zongzhen in Shangjing, he had served as one of the military officials at his side. He had been sporting a full beard then, which he’d shaved off in the years since. The Shulü clan was one of Liao’s noble families; their sons were often assigned posts within the emperor’s personal guard.

“It’s you,” Duan Ling said, smiling. “Are you doing better?”

Shulü Duan took a step forward and bent his knee. He said in Han, “Fully healed. Thank you for saving my life, Your Highness.”

“Don’t call me that,” Duan Ling said, his heart skipping a beat. A cold sweat had broken out on his back.

Thankfully Changliu-jun had gone, or Zongzhen might’ve given his identity away with his little jokes. Although Duan Ling asked for several soldiers to guard him, Yelü Zongzhen had sent only Shulü Duan. He likely had his own reasons for doing so. Shulü Duan was likely a very skilled Khitan martial artist.

“Why were you in the Mongols’ prisoner camp?” Duan Ling asked, surprised the man could speak Han.

“To answer Your High—Excellency,” Shulü Duan said, “my brothers and I disguised ourselves as common folk fleeing the city and were purposely caught by the Yuan army, so as to observe their formations and gather military intelligence on behalf of His Majesty. However, when we were escaping, I was injured by Amugu while trying to save a fellow soldier.”

Duan Ling nodded. He’d met this man once before in Shangjing, and now he had just so happened to save his life. Duan Ling seemed to be building more and more ties with Liao. He was always saving their people, whether the emperor or his subordinate. Maybe it truly was the work of fate.

“Where’s your guard?” Shulü Duan asked. “Has he betrayed you?”

“No! No,” Duan Ling said. “He just…left to sort a few things out. He should be back any time now.”

Chapter 154

DARK CLOUDS BLOTTED out the sky. The gale winds stirred through the city, swirling snowflakes into the air. The first snow of the season was falling earlier than expected both north and south of the Great Wall, catching many unprepared for the approaching winter.

Clad in martial boots and Tangut robes that flapped in the wind, Wu Du gripped Flashblade's hilt as he stepped off the low wall and dropped into an alleyway dusted with a thin layer of snow. On his landing, his hat feather shook, tumbling more snowflakes to the ground.

Deep within the alleyway, a side gate swung open as Lang Junxia emerged.

"When we fought back in Shangjing, did you think this day would come?" Wu Du asked. He was in a foul mood and had been thinking of nothing but cutting Lang Junxia down the entire way.

"No," Lang Junxia said. He could no longer run from Wu Du; slowly, he unsheathed Chilling Edge.

"Do you have anything else to say?"

"No."

Ever since that day in Shangjing, eight years ago, the four assassins' ranks, skills, and power had been constantly in flux—none of them could defeat any other: the mysterious Lang Junxia; the idle Zheng Yan; Wu Du, who'd refrained from fighting for so long; and Changliu-jun, who only ever unsheathed his sword on his master's orders. For eight whole years, whether in the imperial court or in faraway lands, very few had heard of anyone dying at the swords of the Four Great Assassins—and likewise, during that time, the Four Great Assassins had never had a chance to test their skills against one another. But here, today, Wu Du radiated a power unlike anything that had come before.

After eight years, he'd reached his peak at this precise moment.

Snow scattered over the ground. A thin layer accumulated again on the feather on Wu Du's hat, and it was as if they were once again facing off

in Ming Academy’s courtyard. Lang Junxia’s sleeves flapped as a cold wind funneled through the alley.

A single snowflake swirled down from the heavens, fluttering through the air before gently landing on the fine-honed steel of Chilling Edge—where it ever so quietly split in two.

Lang Junxia lunged.

Wu Du swung his sword up, and their figures blurred as they brushed past each other. Clothes rustling, Wu Du slid aside and kicked a spray of snowflakes into the air. Lang Junxia launched himself off the stone wall, twisting his entire body into a single slash. Chilling Edge painted a brilliant arc through the air as it rushed toward Wu Du.

Thrusting his shoulder forward, Wu Du met the strike head-on. He made no attempt to block but angled Flashblade’s point straight at Lang Junxia’s throat as his assailant bore down on him. Lang Junxia jerked his head up, aborting his strike in an eye-blink as he ducked backward.

Flashblade’s tip grazed his neck, slicing through a lock of hair that scattered on the breeze.

The two assassins landed lightly back on the ground.

“Wearing the Radiant White Tiger Armor?” Lang Junxia asked with a sneer.

Wu Du regarded him with disdain, then said, smirking, “No.”

Only then did Lang Junxia realize that Wu Du had simply guessed Lang Junxia wouldn’t risk his life in a fatal clash. If they’d both landed their strikes just then, Wu Du would’ve suffered a grievous injury, but his sword would’ve pierced Lang Junxia’s throat.

The pair fell silent, their eyes taking in one another’s every breath; more and more snow drifted down, landing on Lang Junxia’s hair and eyebrows. When two skilled fighters faced off, neither could afford any distraction; even the most miniscule movement could lead to immediate defeat.

The whisper of cloth came from the alley at Lang Junxia’s back: A third person had made his entrance.

Lang Junxia knew in an instant he wouldn’t escape today.

The towering newcomer filled the entrance of the alleyway, crossing his arms as he stared Lang Junxia down.

Changliu-jun.

“Hello, Wuluohou Mu,” he said coldly. “What brings you here?”

Lang Junxia trembled ever so slightly, but that fine tremor carried all the way down to the tip of his sword. He turned from his two adversaries, leaned against the wall, and looked up at the bar of sky above the alley.

“Don’t be foolish,” another voice cut in. “You don’t still think you can run, do you?” Zheng Yan sprang atop the wall and sat, legs askew.

“Zheng Yan?” Changliu-jun asked, surprised.

A smile crossed Wu Du’s lips. Everything was going according to plan.

“Who could ever have expected this?” Zheng Yan shook a bamboo tube filled with potent shaodaozi wine. “We’re in Liao territory, but seeing so many of you gathered here… Anyone would think something major had happened.”

“When did you get here?” Changliu-jun asked, raising a skeptical brow.

“It’s been a minute,” Zheng Yan said. “I snuck into the city two nights ago when the Mongols invaded and happened to run into Wu Du at the wine shop.”

Changliu-jun didn’t know how much Zheng Yan knew about their mission to locate Wang Qi, but thought it unlikely Wu Du had revealed any secrets to him.

Lang Junxia took advantage of their momentary distraction, flickering out of sight as he lunged for Wu Du.

Wu Du had been thinking deeply, but the instant Lang Junxia moved he raised his own blade, blocking the onrushing strike and thrusting a palm forward. He fought hand to hand with Lang Junxia, their strikes skimming past each other as Zheng Yan and Changliu-jun sprang forward and joined the fray.

Thick snow sifted down from the sky, blanketing the courtyard pines. Duan Ling hadn't seen snow for the last two years and was suddenly reminded of his days in Shangjing. There, once a snowstorm began, it would blow through the city for three days at least, covering all that was dull and unsightly in a soft quilt of white, as if wiping away the traces of the city's past.

Shulü Duan gazed out with him into the courtyard, the two sitting silently together in the hall.

"Have you been back to Shangjing?" Duan Ling asked.

"Yes."

"What's it like now?"

"It's come alive again," Shulü Duan said. "Last year I accompanied His Majesty on his winter hunt in Dongbei. The snow hid all of Shangjing's battle scars."

Duan Ling asked about the Ming and Biyong Academies, where he'd gone to school, about the market and the inns. Some shops in Shangjing had reopened their doors with an iron will, but Ming Academy had moved to Zhongjing. Although the city persisted, it no longer flourished as it once had.

"What's Zhongjing like?" Duan Ling asked. He'd never been.

Shulü Duan thought for a moment. "Your Excellency, it's much like Shangzi."

He'd broached a sensitive subject. Shulü Duan didn't seem to be an ordinary guard; Zongzhen had revealed Duan Ling's identity to him, and now he dared bring up Shangzi in Duan Ling's presence. It seemed Zongzhen had instructed him to approach Duan Ling as a friend and not skirt around any topics.

"I've never seen Shangzi either," Duan Ling said.

"His Majesty loves things from Chen," Shulü Duan responded. "Songs and poems written by the Han, paintings inscribed with verse, even the southern people themselves. Every time someone traveled north to us, he'd ask about you."

Duan Ling nodded.

A sudden clamor broke through the winter silence outside.

Wu Du and Changliu-jun staggered into the room holding a man with a bag over his head. Duan Ling shot to his feet in alarm, knocking over the tea bowl on the table.

Wu Du looked at Shulü Duan, confused. “Who are you?”

Shulü Duan was also on his feet, taking a protective stance in front of Duan Ling.

“Get lost!” Wu Du hissed.

Shulü Duan looked Wu Du up and down, ready to yell for reinforcements.

Duan Ling composed himself enough to say, “Shulü Duan, you may step out for now.”

Shulü Duan put a fist to his palm in salute and retreated outside the hall. He passed another person striding inside, rubbing his hands together.

“What cold weather we’re having,” Zheng Yan said with a brilliant smile. “Governor Wang, why don’t you come over here and warm up in my arms.”

Shulü Duan closed the doors behind him, granting them privacy.

Duan Ling, utterly bewildered, stared at the man Wu Du had apprehended. It couldn’t be…

Wu Du met his eyes and nodded.

“Shulü Duan,” Duan Ling called through the doors. “Please wait outside the main gates. There will be no need to guard me anymore today.”

Shulü Duan acknowledged the order with a grunt. After a moment, his footsteps faded away.

Duan Ling lit a lamp. It was still day, but the snowfall had darkened the sky outside the windows. As the flame flared to life, Changliu-jun grabbed the bag and removed it from their prisoner.

Lang Junxia knelt on the floor, his face pale, a trail of blood dripping from the corner of his mouth. He lifted his head, quietly meeting Duan Ling’s eyes.

Wu Du, Changliu-jun, and Zheng Yan all found seats. Zheng Yan went straight to Duan Ling and settled beside him. Wu Du had chosen a spot on the other side of the room, but his butt had hardly touched the floor when he shot back up, glaring bloody murder. Zheng Yan grudgingly scooted over.

“Aren’t you two fighting?” he said. “I thought you didn’t want him anymore. If you don’t want him, give him to me.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Wu Du said.

He dropped down beside Duan Ling, every inch of him radiating the dangerous aura of a leopard on the prowl.

“We caught him in the alleyway,” Changliu-jun said. He’d taken a seat on the table, crossing one leg over the other.

Wu Du was still wearing his Tangut clothes. He sat with his legs slightly parted, one hand resting on his knee and the other on Duan Ling’s back.

Zheng Yan slouched against the wall, swinging his bamboo flask. It sloshed with a bit of remaining wine, so he uncorked it and took a swig. “Who wants to go first?” he asked.

“Wait—let me ask something,” Duan Ling said. He didn’t turn to Lang Junxia, but rather to Zheng Yan. “Zheng Yan, what are you doing here?”

“You guys left to cut trees for a month,” said Zheng Yan. “But your subordinate couldn’t find you. He came back and asked what he should do. Mister Fei Hongde reckoned you two must’ve headed northwest to Runan. When I got there, I found two cold bodies and some hoofprints running toward the official road. I figured you had to have gone to Luoyan.”

Zheng Yan was truly astute; although he rarely showed off his skills, he wasn’t renowned for nothing.

“Which reminds me,” he said. “What are *you* all doing in Luoyan?”

No one said a word.

Seeing that Duan Ling also remained tight-lipped, Zheng Yan took another mouthful of wine and continued, “When I set about entering the city, the Mongols just so happened to be storming the walls. I ducked into a

wine shop to pinch a drink and came upon your man here half out of his mind, hacking down every Mongol in sight. The next day, someone showed up with your token and brought him to the city guard headquarters. I was worried you two had gotten into some trouble, so I took up a perch outside, cold and hungry."

Duan Ling stared at him wordlessly. He couldn't help but feel a little guilty, but when he cast a glance over at Wu Du, he wore the same stoic expression as always.

Zheng Yan raised his brows as if silently asking, *Need I say more?*

Duan Ling's eyes flickered to Changliu-jun, then back to Wu Du.

"Are you done talking to Zheng Yan? If you are, we have questions for him," Wu Du said, eyeing their prisoner.

Since the moment he'd been brought into the hall and unhooded, Lang Junxia's eyes had never left Duan Ling. That steady gaze sent a chill up Duan Ling's spine. Lang Junxia was too close; Duan Ling had the impression that the assassin could slip his restraints and wrap a hand around his throat at any time. He couldn't help shifting backward. Wu Du's arm tightened around him in response.

"Who wants to go first?" Changliu-jun asked.

"I'll go," Zheng Yan said. "I am completely and utterly confused. Lord Wuluohou Mu, for what did you travel a thousand miles across the land to Luoyan? Don't tell me you've also fallen for our Governor Wang."

"That's something you should be asking Changliu-jun," Lang Junxia responded.

After a pause, Changliu-jun asked, "Where's Chang Pin?"

"Don't know."

"Why was Skychaser with you?" Wu Du asked.

"I found him by the roadside and rode him here."

"Chang Pin?" Zheng Yan furrowed his brow. "He's here too?"

Lang Junxia fell silent.

"The crown prince sent you, didn't he?" Wu Du asked.

“Gentlemen,” Lang Junxia said in a low voice, kneeling with his hands bound behind him with a sturdy bowstring. “You are all well aware of the consequences for killing an official of the court, or acting as an accomplice to such a killing.”

“Of course we know,” Wu Du said in frigid tones. “That’s why you won’t have a chance to charge us for that crime.”

His words startled them all—Wu Du truly intended to kill him. Though it was said that for an assassin killing a man was as menial as eating a meal, it was a serious matter for any one of the Four Great Assassins to kill another. Duan Ling’s heart leapt into his throat. Was Wu Du really going to go through with it?

“Let’s not,” Changliu-jun said, sensing the situation becoming dangerous. He bore Lang Junxia no grudge, and even though he was Mu Kuangda’s man, he wouldn’t dare kill someone so important without Mu Kuangda’s explicit permission.

“I have a secret edict from the crown prince ordering me to travel to Luoyan and investigate the Liao military,” Lang Junxia announced.

“Then why did you try to kill me?” Duan Ling shot back.

They had no proof of whether Lang Junxia was lying about the edict—but Duan Ling’s quick thinking turned his reasoning back on him.

“You didn’t die,” Lang Junxia said with a smile.

“Even if I didn’t die, it doesn’t mean you never tried to kill me,” Duan Ling said.

“Killing is only killing if someone dies,” Lang Junxia said. “Since you’re still alive, I never killed you.”

Duan Ling didn’t want to argue in circles with him. “Then let’s put it this way: Why did you chase me with a sword? Is it because we learned something we shouldn’t, and now you need to silence us?”

“Learned what?” asked Zheng Yan.

Changliu-jun unconsciously sat up straighter; Wu Du’s face paled.

“You want to reveal this in front of everyone, right now?” Lang Junxia asked, raising his brows a fraction. “You’re a smart kid. I know you

won’t.”

Duan Ling cast a glance at Changliu-jun. While his mask hid his expression, Duan Ling could tell from his reaction that he knew Cai Yan was a fake—but he didn’t know Duan Ling was the real thing. Beside him, Zheng Yan’s face had grown terribly serious; judging by that look, Zheng Yan had his suspicions too.

Changliu-jun and Zheng Yan both turned to Duan Ling. Wu Du gave him a worried glance. For the span of a breath, the whole room had their eyes on him.

Chapter 155

“I KNOW NO MORE than anyone else here,” Duan Ling said. “Did you come to kill Amugu, Lord Wuluohou Mu?”

And with that, Duan Ling bounced the hot yam that had landed in his hands back to Lang Junxia.

Zheng Yan let out a laugh.

“How interesting,” Wu Du said in an icy tone.

Duan Ling was certain that, on the night Amugu had thrown Cai Yan into the river, Changliu-jun had heard his speech in its entirety, but he still didn’t know if Zheng Yan had. Even so, he presumed Zheng Yan had pieced some details together by now.

“This isn’t a joking matter, Governor Wang,” Lang Junxia said flatly.

“The thing is, some things sound like a joke but are in fact deadly serious, Lord Wuluohou Mu,” Wu Du replied. He held his open palm out in front of Duan Ling, who stared at it blankly. Wu Du pointed at his chest, and he understood. Reaching into his breast pocket, he pulled out the golden ball and deposited it in the center of Wu Du’s palm. Wu Du grasped it, advancing toward Lang Junxia.

“Forgive me, Lord Wuluohou Mu,” he said politely.

Realizing what was about to happen, Duan Ling nearly jolted forward to stop Wu Du, but it was too late—the golden crow landed on Lang Junxia’s skin and scuttled beneath his collar. Changliu-jun couldn’t suppress a shudder, but Zheng Yan remained expressionless, seemingly used to Wu Du’s antics. For the first time, it truly hit Duan Ling that the Wu Du he knew wasn’t the same man everyone else was familiar with; he was simply used to seeing a side of Wu Du that was loyal and harmless.

“I’d advise you to stay still,” Wu Du said. “Don’t pull anything like trying to take a hostage. If you move a single muscle, the golden crow’s poison will paralyze you before you complete your strike.”

He got to his feet and walked out into the corridor.

Changliu-jun and Zheng Yan exchanged a look, then rose and followed him out. Wu Du obviously wanted to speak to them out of Lang Junxia's earshot.

Still uneasy, Duan Ling was about to rise too when Wu Du glanced back through the narrow crack in the doors and shook his head minutely. Wu Du would relay everything to him afterward. For now, Duan Ling had to stay away to avoid being implicated.

Zheng Yan shut the doors, closing off that final crack, and the three assassins stepped into a remote corner of the courtyard. Wu Du was silent. Each of them had a different idea of what was going on. Changliu-jun's gaze wandered aimlessly; he didn't seem to be himself.

Inside the hall, the afternoon sun filtered through the latticed window to streak across the floor in front of Duan Ling and Lang Junxia. The light that made it past the glistening snowflakes refracted off drifting dust particles in the air, an ever-changing kaleidoscope. The crisscrossing light and shadow swept Duan Ling back to the night when Lang Junxia had carried him from the woodshed amid a snow of reed flowers, blanketed by soft moonlight.

Only the two of them were left in the room.

Finally, Duan Ling could ask—"Why did you do it?"

"Do what?" Lang Junxia replied, his eyes fixed on the hem of Duan Ling's robe, which was embroidered with a line of geese, the totem of the Tangut people. Geese flew south in the fall and returned north in spring, never forgetting the way back home.

"Why did you attack Xunchun in Shangjing? Why did you try to kill me in Xichuan?" He knew Lang Junxia would give him no answers, but even so, the questions spilled out of him. "Why did you poison me—why did you throw me into the river?"

Lang Junxia lifted his eyes to meet Duan Ling's. "You put your trust in the wrong person. I am Wuluohou Mu, not Lang Junxia," he said, settling back into his usual calm.

Duan Ling paused. This man was no longer the Lang Junxia he had known—or perhaps he never had been, and had only become another person during the brief time they'd spent together in Shangjing.

Wuluohou Mu or Lang Junxia: Which was the real him?

“I came here to kill your people,” Lang Junxia said with an air of indifference. “Since you Han put your trust in me, you should’ve been prepared for me to betray you.”

Duan Ling stared at him in shock. He whispered, “To take revenge?”

“Thirty years ago, the kingdom of Wuluohou was destroyed,” Lang Junxia said quietly. “The royal family brought me away to the Xianbei Mountains to take refuge. I scraped by, living a wretched life—and then the Han and the Mongols came, washing my village in blood, killing my people. ‘Joyful Reunion’ was originally our song.”

Duan Ling didn’t know what to say.

“It’s a melody about waiting under the peach blossoms for your lover to return.” Lang Junxia lifted his head slightly, meeting Duan Ling’s gaze again, a complicated look in his eyes. “Duan Ling, you’ve grown up. I used to tell you there were things you’d know when you were older, but now that I think about it, there are some things it’s best you never know.”

Duan Ling’s breath stuttered. “Then… Why didn’t you just kill me at the start?”

“Because you were still useful to me when you were small,” Lang Junxia said. “What could your dad do all by himself? I needed both of you, the father and the son, to take control in Southern Chen and restore my kingdom.”

“So that’s why, when you thought I was dead, you helped Cai Yan become the crown prince,” Duan Ling said, his voice trembling. “What deal did you two strike?”

A smile crossed Lang Junxia’s lips, and he said no more, his eyes falling back down to Duan Ling’s hem.

Outside, the winter wind swished through the courtyard, and the snow fell in thick drifts, sticking to the three assassins’ hair and shoulders.

“You can’t kill him,” Changliu-jun said. “He’s the crown prince’s Grand Guardian, an official of the second rank. If you kill a member of the court without permission, no one here will come out unscathed.”

“Allow me one question,” Zheng Yan said. “Was Amugu telling the truth?”

Wu Du looked at Zheng Yan; both he and Changliu-jun went quiet.

“If you want to keep secrets from me,” Zheng Yan said, “I can pretend I never heard a thing—but if you intend to kill Wuluohou Mu today, you’ll need to explain yourself clearly. There’s no way I’ll support this otherwise.”

“Why did you come here?” Changliu-jun asked him.

“Didn’t I already tell you?” Zheng Yan rebuffed him lightly.

“I meant, why did you come to Ye.”

“His Majesty issued a secret edict. I can’t tell you what it is.”

Changliu-jun snorted.

Wu Du deliberated for another moment. “The crown prince is a fake. Chang Pin found evidence to corroborate this in Luoyan.”

His words shocked Changliu-jun, who’d never imagined Wu Du would reveal the truth so plainly. “This is on your head, Wu Du,” he said coldly. “I haven’t said a word.”

“Sure. I’m the one who said it, and if the prime minister has any opinions about that, he knows where to find me.”

Zheng Yan, however, showed no sign of surprise. “So where’s the real one?”

“Don’t know,” said Wu Du.

“What evidence do you have?”

“The evidence is a person,” Wu Du told him. “Keep your nose out of it, Zheng Yan. Pretend you don’t know anything.”

Zheng Yan occupied a more sensitive position than either Wu Du or Changliu-jun. Not only did he serve Li Yanqiu directly, but he had a powerful second backer: the Marquis of Huaiyin, Yao Fu. If Yao Fu found out about this, the consequences could be disastrous—which was the other reason Changliu-jun felt it had been inappropriate for Wu Du to leak the secret.

“Changliu-jun will find a way to bring the witness back to the capital,” Wu Du said. “As for what happens after, that will be up to Prime Minister Mu’s discretion. Wuluohou Mu probably traveled all this way because he found out about the witness too and wanted to silence him, but we reached the target first. Now that we’ve caught Wuluohou Mu, the three of us must decide what to do with him. This has nothing to do with Wang Shan; there’s no need to drag him into it.”

“How much does he know?” Zheng Yan asked.

“He was by the riverside that night too,” Wu Du said. “But that’s all. Wang Shan never came to Luoyan; he was in Ye this whole time. Right now, only the three of us are standing in this courtyard.”

Zheng Yan and Changliu-jun exchanged a glance. It was clear Wu Du was dead set on protecting Wang Shan. After all, if this affair came to light, who knew how many would be found guilty by association under the wave of Li Yanqiu’s imperial fury.

“When Wuluohou Mu brought the crown prince back to the capital, I thought then that something wasn’t right,” Changliu-jun said. “You would expect a prince who’d gone through so many hardships returning to the court to talk about his past, but the prince rarely spoke of it—as if he was afraid he would slip up if he said too much.”

“Does His Majesty know?” Wu Du asked.

After a long and hesitant pause, Zheng Yan slowly shook his head. He didn’t clarify whether he meant His Majesty didn’t know—or whether Zheng Yan didn’t *know* if His Majesty knew. He only said, “If that’s the case, then we absolutely can’t kill Wuluohou Mu. He’s the most important witness. If he’s dead, who can testify to the truth?”

Wu Du and Changliu-jun lapsed into silence. It was just as Zheng Yan had said: They couldn’t end his life here. If the mastermind behind the false crown prince died, they would have no hard evidence. And if Li Yanqiu learned that the three of them had colluded to kill him, he’d assume they were acting on Mu Kuangda’s orders.

“Can’t *you* testify?” Changliu-jun asked Zheng Yan.

“Of course not. What are you thinking? I’m not involved in this.”

Outside the hall, the snow slowly came to a stop. Inside, Duan Ling sat in silent contemplation. Lang Junxia had given him the answer he'd expected, but at the same time, he'd mercilessly shredded the last image of the warm man Duan Ling remembered from Shangjing and brandished the bloody truth in its place.

"So it was all just pretend," Duan Ling said. "How well you treated me. It was all an act."

"Yes." Lang Junxia raised his eyes to look at Duan Ling again. "Your dad was right when he said you couldn't trust me. You simply believed in the wrong person. I told you not to pay me back because I was never genuinely good to you; I merely wanted to make use of you and your father in my plan to reinstate my kingdom. Or, if not, then at least use you to take revenge by making you fight Yuan and inflict heavy casualties on the Han and Mongols both. The Cai family was executed as a direct result of Southern Chen's plot—Cai Yan hates the Han, and he also hates the Mongols. Since you were already dead, I had nowhere else to go. I thought: Why not let him take your place as the heir to the throne?"

He looked Duan Ling over for a long moment. "I didn't think you would return all grown up. But I made my bed, and now I must lie in it."

The world was shrouded in white. Duan Ling thought back to the frozen Yellow River that had stretched for miles, and the wilderness that had glistened like carven jade. How he'd once curled up against Lang Junxia's chest, felt his warmth, and listened to the steady beat of his heart as Lang Junxia took him from his dark, hopeless nightmare into the bright, open world.

"I don't believe you," Duan Ling said.

Lang Junxia dropped his gaze.

"Believe what you want," he said, settling back into indifference. "I've answered your question."

"You gave me the answer I expected to hear," Duan Ling said, taking a seat in front of Lang Junxia and gazing into his eyes. "But not one from the heart." As he sat there, an imposing presence seemed to cloak him—a dignity and bearing long absent from the world. "You lie differently from other people. You look the other person in the eye when you're lying, but

you avert your gaze when you tell the truth. You’re so used to hiding yourself—”

Wu Du pushed open the doors, and light flooded into the hall.

Chapter 156

“ARE YOU SURE this will work?” Changliu-jun asked him.

“Once he swallows this pill, his qi will become erratic if he tries to draw on it,” Wu Du explained. “He’ll be unable to use his martial arts until he takes the antidote.”

Wu Du held the pill out before Lang Junxia. “Swallow it. Don’t make me force you.”

It was useless to fight; Lang Junxia swallowed the pill without resistance. Duan Ling’s lips parted nervously, but he didn’t make a sound. He had absolute faith in Wu Du’s ability with medicines. Despite idling around all day and never seeming to take anything seriously, when they truly decided to face off against someone, each of these assassins was more ruthless than the last.

Wu Du watched Lang Junxia swallow the pill, then took out a small porcelain bottle and shook it next to Lang Junxia’s lapels. The golden crow, picking up the bottle’s scent, crawled out of his robes and curled up into a ball.

Wu Du retrieved the creature and passed it to Duan Ling to put back into his clothes.

“What now?” Duan Ling asked.

“Now, there’s something I need to discuss with you.”

As the day wore on, the snow had cleared, and a golden sunset beamed through the railings of the corridor. Wu Du took the lead, his bearing tall and upright, with Duan Ling trailing behind him all the way to the back courtyard garden. The garden was much more open; they would be able to see immediately if anyone tried to eavesdrop.

Duan Ling pulled to a stop, and Wu Du turned to face him. He examined Wu Du’s expression, and—worried Wu Du might still be mad after their argument the previous night—felt a sense of unease wash over him.

Wu Du stared into his eyes with a serious intensity. Even now, a spark of desire flickered in his gaze. “If only you weren’t the crown prince,” he whispered, lifting a hand to Duan Ling’s earlobe and softly rubbing it.

Duan Ling’s heart skipped a beat, and that rippling feeling deep inside him howled again for release. He surged forward, wrapping his arms tight around Wu Du and burrowing into his chest. Neither moved, embracing each other without a word.

“Your heart’s beating so fast,” Duan Ling murmured.

“I’m scared,” Wu Du said. “Zheng Yan knows, and Mu Kuangda knows. Too much is out of our control.”

“We’ll find a way,” Duan Ling reassured him, held snug against his body.

If Mu Kuangda learned he was the real crown prince, he would instantly come up with a thousand ways to eliminate him. As the current crown prince, Cai Yan didn’t pose much of a threat to the prime minister—but Duan Ling taking his rightful place would fill him with fear.

“Are you honestly planning to have him testify?” Duan Ling asked, looking up at Wu Du.

“It’s no use with just hearsay. We need physical evidence too, or the court will launch a detailed investigation that will implicate who knows how many people. Once we take the first step, there’ll be no turning back.”

Duan Ling sighed and stepped back, but Wu Du kept a tight grip on his hand. They both knew that when Zheng Yan returned to the capital, he would no doubt bring this matter directly before Li Yanqiu, and that Li Yanqiu wouldn’t simply stand by. Changliu-jun, too, would surely report what he’d learned to Mu Kuangda.

What they couldn’t predict was whether Cai Yan would find out. Regardless, all three parties would make their moves while Duan Ling was still stuck in Ye, unable to return to the capital.

“It might be a good thing for us,” Duan Ling said. “If we stay in Ye, we can wait for Prime Minister Mu and Cai Yan to fight it out among themselves and go back once the dust settles. That would be far easier.”

“Mm,” Wu Du hummed, then lapsed into an uneasy silence.

Another thought occurred to Duan Ling. “Zongzhen promised he would gather evidence against Cai Yan when he gets back home. Maybe he can dig up some old records.”

Wu Du lowered his head to gaze at Duan Ling, his eyes filled with a complicated tangle of emotions.

“If you want to leave, we’ll leave,” Duan Ling said.

He was letting Wu Du make the ultimate choice, but Wu Du smiled back at him with sadness, as if his anger had burned away, leaving only helplessness in its stead. “Does half the empire really belong to me?” he asked, gazing at Duan Ling as if this young man himself was his half of the empire.

Mirth sparkled in Duan Ling’s eyes. Wu Du was seized by the urge to lean down and kiss him, but he couldn’t bear to do so in the wake of that look and simply drank him in.

“Bring the troops and wait for us in Heishan Valley,” Duan Ling told him. “Zheng Yan and Changliu-jun are here. I’ll be perfectly safe.”

“After this whole thing is over,” Wu Du said. “You have to promise to do a little something for me.”

“Whatever you want,” Duan Ling told him. “I already belong to you.”

“It has to be from the heart.”

“I’ve never deceived you, because I know how easy it is,” Duan Ling said, earnest now. “If I coax you with a few sweet words, you’ll do anything for me, and even if I deny it after, there’s nothing you can do. But you see? I’m true to my word.”

“You know I’m easy to please,” Wu Du agreed, an aggressive glint in his eyes as he snaked an arm around Duan Ling’s waist. He said in a colder tone, “You’re taking advantage of the fact that Laoye won’t leave you to make me do things I don’t want to do.”

“Will you, then?” Duan Ling whispered, stroking Wu Du’s cheek, then rising on his toes to kiss him.

Dusk deepened the sky overhead as the last rays of the setting sun fell over them, casting long shadows over the ground. The shadows of the trees

tangled at their feet, and the snow on their branches glinted with sunset's bloody glow.

Back inside the hall, Zheng Yan said, "Sometimes I think you have it pretty tough, Lord Wuluohou Mu."

Lang Junxia sat with his hands tied behind him, leaning back against a corner of the hall.

Zheng Yan had settled in another corner, drinking wine the Khitan soldiers had offered him. Changliu-jun sat a short distance away; he fished out a stack of cards with characters on one side and colorful drawings on the other. The illustrations depicted items like a carriage, a horse, a lamp—word cards the common people used to learn to read.

“Changliu-jun, what are you doing?” Zheng Yan asked, bemused.

“Mind your own damn business,” Changliu-jun shot back. “Drink your wine and ask him your questions.”

Already on his way to drunk, Zheng Yan belched, then looked Lang Junxia over. “What do you want? You don’t drink, you don’t indulge in pleasure, you don’t like money or treasure, you don’t seek power.”

“Yeah,” Changliu-jun agreed. “What *do* you want? If you weren’t here giving us grief, would we have had to come all the way here and suffer?”

Lang Junxia maintained his usual silence. He turned and tipped his head against the door, watching the small sliver of sky he could see through the crack fade into darkness.

“Is it true?” Zheng Yan pressed on. “Relax. If you explain everything clearly now—even if you deny it in the future—it’s not like we have anyone to tell. *We* won’t be the ones to pull you up and confront you in court. Will you at least give us the real story?”

Changliu-jun glanced between them warily.

Lang Junxia looked at Zheng Yan, but he still didn’t respond. He’d never been a man of many words in the first place. Brow furrowed, he returned to looking out into the corridor, as if waiting for someone.

When Duan Ling came back, he was alone.

“Change of plans,” he announced to the room. “We’ll need to stay in Luoyan another five days.”

Neither Zheng Yan nor Changliu-jun objected, but Changliu-jun did ask, “Where’s Wu Du?”

“He went back to Ye,” Duan Ling said. He removed his boots in the corridor, then stepped inside and closed the door behind him. His eyes darted to Lang Junxia, whose hands were still bound. “He’s gone to fetch us an army. Let’s find a way to get Yelü Zongzhen back to Zhongjing.”

“Are you really going to help the Khitan fight their war?” Changliu-jun asked.

“Is there a problem with that?” Duan Ling replied.

He took a seat at the table, dragged over a piece of paper and a brush, and began addressing a letter to Han Bin, the border general of Yubi Pass.

“The fates of Chen and Liao are intertwined,” Duan Ling said. “Zongzhen is besieged in an isolated city; if civil unrest breaks out in Liao, the effects will ripple through all the other nations; our Great Chen will also have new problems to contend with. This autumn, the Liao emperor lent me twenty thousand dan of grain to feed Ye. I can’t let this favor go unreturned.”

“How will you explain this to His Majesty?” Zheng Yan asked.

“A general in the field may disregard his sovereign’s orders where circumstances require it,” Duan Ling said. “Even if a messenger rode nonstop for the capital from Ye, the round trip would take weeks. We can’t afford to wait on the court. When His Majesty appointed me, he gave me a written edict to use at my discretion. We don’t have to heed the officials of the court.”

Since Duan Ling had put it that way, there was nothing more Zheng Yan and Changliu-jun could say in protest.

“You know more about the country’s affairs than us killing blades,” Zheng Yan conceded. “If you think it’s necessary, then we will do as you command.”

In fact, there was no need for him to say so, since his opinion technically didn’t matter in this regard. But Duan Ling smiled nonetheless. “Thanks.”

Zheng Yan swigged his wine and smiled mischievously back at him.

Duan Ling understood what he hadn’t said: He would help Duan Ling plead his case if Li Yanqiu later censured him. After all, he was deploying Chen troops across the border into Liao on no authority but his own. If the ministers of the court were set on making trouble for him over it, they’d certainly find a way.

But he couldn’t worry about that now. As long as Wu Du agreed to his plan, nothing else mattered.

“I never thought Wu Du would be willing to save the Khitan,” Zheng Yan remarked offhand.

“Because of the grudge of the nation?” Duan Ling asked.

Zheng Yan didn’t answer, and Duan Ling finished writing his letter. He set it aside, and Changliu-jun picked it up to read it.

“You have to understand,” Duan Ling told Zheng Yan. “If I’d tried to persuade him by invoking the good of the nation and the safety of the people, he wouldn’t be doing it. But I told him it was for my sake, so he will.”

Zheng Yan laughed. “I would also lead an army for you if you asked me. Spend tonight with me, and tomorrow I’ll bring you Ögedei’s head. We’ll have no need for Wu Du.”

“Drink your wine,” Duan Ling retorted. “The owner of this place has been generous with you on my account. Keep it up, and you won’t have any more wine to enjoy.”

“Bring back Ögedei’s head? You think you have what it takes?” Changliu-jun said, scrutinizing Zheng Yan. “Don’t get taken hostage and make someone else rescue you.”

“If I can’t bring back his head, then at least I’ll have just as much joy dying in the attempt. Or don’t tell me, Shan-er—you prefer hulking giants like Changliu-jun?”

If Changliu-jun blushed, it was hidden by his mask. “Why don’t you and that friend of yours in the corner have a go instead, put on a good show for us? If you have any aphrodisiacs, you can make things more fun.”

“Hey, if His Highness Wuluohou Mu were ten years younger, I would travel to hell and back for him too. I’d happily have him for three days and three nights, no problem. Ah, what a pity…” Zheng Yan sighed.

“Enough!” Duan Ling snapped. *Do you two ever shut up? Why can’t you sit in the corner and be quiet like Lang Junxia?*

Zheng Yan got to his feet, staggering out of the hall and almost tripping over the threshold. He flowed into a Drunken Fist stance, standing firm briefly, then brushed off his robes and strolled away.

“Where are you going?” Duan Ling called after him.

“To make some dinner.” Zheng Yan’s voice carried back down the corridor. “I haven’t had a proper meal in days.”

Duan Ling’s irritation dissipated at once. Honestly, what a blessing it was to have Zheng Yan by their side.

He called for Shulü Duan to pass a message to Yelü Zongzhen, informing him that there would be some odd guests staying in his quarters for the next few days. He asked that the Liao emperor to overlook their strange conduct and fulfill their requests as best he could.

A stretch of time passed, and Shulü Duan returned to report that Zheng Yan was indeed cooking in the kitchen. Duan Ling let himself relax. Out of the four assassins, the only one dangerous to him had been poisoned into submission. With the other two in attendance, this courtyard was possibly the safest place in the world.

Chapter 157

OVER DINNER, Changliu-jun asked out of nowhere, “You know the Liao emperor?”

“Not before this,” Duan Ling responded absently, already thinking about how to join forces with Wu Du and beat back the fifty thousand soldiers outside the city. “I met him by chance a few days ago.”

Changliu-jun had asked out of simple curiosity, so Duan Ling kept the details light.

“He sure seems to like you a lot,” Zheng Yan chimed in.

“Must be my pretty face,” Duan Ling said. “Good-looking people always have it easier; in their eyes, the world is a beautiful place because everyone always treats them well.”

Five tables had been arranged in Duan Ling’s guest hall. The first on the left was unoccupied, reserved for Wu Du; beside it sat Zheng Yan. Changliu-jun sat to Duan Ling’s right, and Lang Junxia—whose restraints had been temporarily removed—sat at his own table beside him, eating in silence.

As Duan Ling moved his chopsticks, a thought occurred to him: Was this how they would sit in the future if he someday regained his place as the crown prince? The four assassins would guard him in shifts through the day and night, and gather in the same hall to share dinner. If only Wu Du were here now, it would be perfect.

“Not necessarily,” Lang Junxia said suddenly. “Just because people treat them well, it doesn’t mean that the heavens will do the same.”

Changliu-jun rolled his eyes in mockery. Duan Ling didn’t want to hear them squabbling over dinner, so he hummed in agreement and said, “Lord Wuluohou indeed has a point.”

Whatever comment Changliu-jun had been tempted to make went unvoiced after that.

Duan Ling polished off every morsel Zheng Yan had cooked. Changliu-jun and Lang Junxia were only able to enjoy such a delicious meal because of him. Once he finished, he set aside the food box, intending to head off and see Yelü Zongzhen at once.

"Who's cleaning up?" Changliu-jun asked.

"You," Zheng Yan said. "You have the lowest rank of anyone here, so you're doing the scrubbing."

"The captive can do it," said Changliu-jun.

"Just call a servant," Duan Ling said. He rose and started in the direction of Yelü Zongzhen's quarters. Zheng Yan got up to follow, but Duan Ling held up a hand. "Settle in for the night. Don't worry about me."

If he brought Changliu-jun or Zheng Yan along and they heard his conversation with Yelü Zongzhen, it would make them even more suspicious. Even if he and Yelü Zongzhen spoke in Khitan, their tone and mannerisms might give them away. Now that Lang Junxia was their captive, Duan Ling wasn't in any danger; there was no reason for him to be so cautious. Duan Ling stretched his arms overhead, then set off down the corridor—yet hardly a moment later, Lang Junxia walked out after him.

His hands were bound again now that he was done eating, this time with heavy iron cuffs closed with a padlock. Unless he cut off his hand, there was no way he could slip free.

Changliu-jun gazed out at them from inside the hall. Duan Ling shook his head, signaling it was all right.

As Lang Junxia followed him through the garden, Duan Ling mused that if Wu Du were there, he would be following Lang Junxia more closely than his own shadow. But Zheng Yan and Changliu-jun were unaware of his and Lang Junxia's history. As far as they were concerned, it would be useless for Lang Junxia to silence Duan Ling now.

If Wu Du's poison was effective, Lang Junxia should have only one-tenth of his usual power. But was he still dangerous?

Duan Ling spun and gave him a hard shove; caught by surprise, Lang Junxia missed a step and almost tripped over a nearby flowerpot.

He really can't use his martial arts, Duan Ling thought.

Lang Junxia read his intentions with barely a second's thought. After regaining his footing, said, "Your hand moved too fast into your strike just now."

"My dad taught me the Mountain and River style," Duan Ling replied. "But I was a lousy student."

"When you lower the left arm, push out with the right, then use the left to block."

Duan Ling ignored him, turning and continuing on his way. "Why are you following me?"

Behind him, Lang Junxia's iron cuffs and padlock clanged quietly along. When he finally spoke, he didn't answer the question. "I came to find you in Ye, but you had already gone to Luoyan. Why?"

"Zongzhen is here." Duan Ling made up a reason on the spot; he couldn't let him know about Wang Qi. "I came to repay him for lending me provisions."

"That's right." Lang Junxia nodded. "You saved his life. Of course he would help you."

How could Lang Junxia know he'd saved Yelü Zongzhen? He hadn't been in Shangjing at the time… Duan Ling started in shock as many things that hadn't made sense before suddenly fell into place.

There was only one possible explanation: He was the assassin who had appeared on the road on that spring night.

In disbelief, Duan Ling turned and asked him, "You were the one who ambushed Zongzhen?"

"Mm," Lang Junxia agreed, as if it was a trivial question.

"Who ordered you to kill him?"

"You'll find out eventually," Lang Junxia said, his brows lifting a fraction.

Duan Ling was stumped. There was simply no way to reason with this man—he'd been like this before, and even after so many years, he hadn't changed a bit.

Duan Ling faced front again and continued walking. He abruptly realized something and spun back, trying to keep his voice steady. “You have no grudge against the Khitan, so why try to kill Zongzhen?”

Lang Junxia looked down at Duan Ling, then let his eyes slide past him.

“Duan Ling,” Zongzhen called from behind them. “I was just about to come and see you.”

Duan Ling took a moment to gather himself. Countless ideas flashed through his head, yet he struck each down in turn. Could it be that Lang Junxia held some grudge against the Khitan too? Based on what he’d said before, he had no such vendetta. But as long as Lang Junxia intended to hide the truth from them, he could merely make up some hostility he had toward the Khitan and no one would truly know if they were lies.

Duan Ling approached Zongzhen, his thoughts in disarray. Zongzhen cast a brief glance at Lang Junxia and threw an arm around Duan Ling’s shoulders to usher him into the hall. When Lang Junxia tried to follow, the guards stopped him at the threshold; he was forced to wait outside.

“What’s going on?” Zongzhen hadn’t missed the oddness in Duan Ling’s expression.

Duan Ling shook his head, and Zongzhen switched to Khitan. “If you’re using another identity, should I address you differently?”

“Call me Wang Shan,” Duan Ling replied in the same language. “Though I still like Duan Ling more.”

Zongzhen nodded. He gestured for Duan Ling to take a seat on the divan, then settled beside him. They faced each other with only a low table placed on the seat between them. Duan Ling was conscious of being bestowed a high honor. Very few in Liao would be granted a seat on the same level as the emperor; this was a privilege not even Han Weiyong could boast.

“You first. What’s going on?” Zongzhen asked, his gaze intent.

Duan Ling pondered for a moment, wondering whether his plan would be effective. “I sent Wu Du back for an army.”

“How many men?” Zongzhen said, his spirits visibly lifting.

“Two thousand. That’s the most I can provide.”

Two against fifty thousand—Cai Yan would no doubt snort at those odds, but if luck was on their side, and with the aid of another thousand or so soldiers from Luoyan, Duan Ling knew they had a chance. Even if they couldn’t force the Mongols all the way back north, they could at least break out of the siege.

Zongzhen rose to his feet and paced around the hall. “This is an ingenious move,” he muttered to himself.

Duan Ling felt himself relax. It seemed Zongzhen had something more to show for the last few years than just the muscles he’d gained training on horseback. He’d led an army, and knew the utility of one. If Zongzhen had said *too small* to those numbers, it would’ve been over; even Duan Ling’s father, had he been alive, would have given up on Zongzhen then and saved himself.

“How many? Cavalry? Infantry?” Zongzhen asked.

“They’re all veterans,” said Duan Ling. “Give them bows, and every soldier can shoot on horseback. Give them a shield and a saber, and every man can fight on foot. They’ve guarded Ye and Hejian alone for ten years, and before that, they were…” Duan Ling hesitated for a moment, then continued, his tone grave, “…soldiers of the Northern Expedition Army, my father’s men, specifically trained to fight against the Khitan and the Mongols.”

“If they knew they were rushing here to save me, would they resist their orders?” Yelü Zongzhen asked.

“No. I have faith in Wu Du.”

They were Wu Du’s men now, and since Wu Du had agreed, he would find a way. Even Duan Ling, though he was governor, could not overstep his role and command Hebei’s army.

“I see,” Yelü Zongzhen said. He seemed about to ask for a moment to think, then changed his mind. Instead he sat down and took Duan Ling’s hand in his, palm to palm. “What’s your plan?”

“I don’t have one.” In fact, Duan Ling did have one idea in mind, but he kept it to himself, not wanting to reveal it to Yelü Zongzhen quite yet.

“Tell me what to do; I’ll write to Wu Du and tell him to carry out whatever you decide.”

Yelü Zongzhen nodded. “If we can escape the city, I’ll have to travel through your country, head north through Tong Pass and into Western Liang, then return from there to Zhongjing.”

Since Duan Ling had decided to lend his aid to Yelü Zongzhen, he needed to see it through to the end—sending the Buddha all the way west, so to speak. Breaking through the siege only to leave him stranded in enemy territory wouldn’t do. This was something he’d already thought through.

“I’ve sent a letter to the border general at Yubi Pass, Han Bin. When the time comes, you can disguise yourself as a merchant and pass through there. If you leave Chen through Yubi Pass, you won’t have to go all that way around.”

Yelü Zongzhen accepted the letter Duan Ling held out to him, giving it a brief glance before placing it aside. “Thank you.”

Duan Ling knew he would need time to consider it, but he couldn’t help but say, “Zongzhen.”

He wouldn’t have spoken like this before, but now, they were on equal footing. Though he was unrecognized and in exile, Duan Ling was still the crown prince of his nation. Etiquette demanded that the heir to the throne be accorded the same respect as a ruler. Yelü Zongzhen was more than aware of this, which was why he was treating him as befitted his station.

Yelü Zongzhen met Duan Ling’s eyes.

“There’s something else I should say,” Duan Ling continued. “It was fate that allowed us to meet again here. Next time, I fear I won’t be there to help.”

“I know,” Yelü Zongzhen replied. Duan Ling’s words were a warning: If he didn’t deal with Han Weiyong speedily, he would soon be in danger again. “It was also because you were by my side last time that I was able to overcome that tribulation. I’ve had the same thought many times, but I couldn’t bring myself to do that to…”

He broke off, but Duan Ling knew he meant Empress Dowager Xiao. After all, she was his mother. But despite Yelü Zongzhen's hesitations, if he still refused to act upon his return to Liao, all the effort Duan Ling had spent to rescue him would be in vain. Duan Ling was willing to save him—but if the situation in Liao deviated from Duan Ling's plans after, that wasn't something he could accept.

Imperial families had been ruthless since time immemorial. There was no shortage of examples of fathers and sons tearing into each other, of kin slaying kin. What would he do, he wondered, if faced with the same choice?

"Don't worry," Yelü Zongzhen said. "Last time I returned to Zhongjing, I was still ignorant of the affairs of the court, and the ministers loyal to me had yet to gain their footing, so I bided my time. Han Weiyong made such a ruthless move because he knows that if he can't kill me, I will kill him. I promise you, once I return to Zhongjing, I'll find a way to eliminate him within half a year."

Duan Ling nodded. Now that he'd secured this promise, he could breathe a little easier.

Chapter 158

"DID YOU EVER FIND any clues about the assassin that attacked you in Shangjing?" Duan Ling asked.

Though he now knew it had been Lang Junxia, he had an inkling the story wasn't as simple as that. Since Lang Junxia wouldn't tell him anything more, his only option was to probe Yelü Zongzhen.

"Actually, this is related to why I was looking for you in the first place." Yelü Zongzhen got to his feet again. "The assassin was someone sent by your country."

I know, Duan Ling thought.

"That's why I suspected Han Weiyong and Chen have had previous dealings—but I still need to investigate this further. After I take down Han Weiyong, I'll interrogate him *thoroughly*. We'll have our answers within the half year."

A layer of fog seemed to be obscuring a truth that was screaming out at Duan Ling, rendering it nothing more than a faint outline. He was still missing one last crucial piece of the puzzle.

Yelü Zongzhen continued, "What I wanted to talk about is the whereabouts of two swords. After the fall of Shangjing…"

Duan Ling clapped a hand over Yelü Zongzhen's mouth. Lang Junxia was still standing just outside the hall. Yelü Zongzhen met his eyes with barely any distance between them.

Yelü Zongzhen grabbed a piece of paper and wrote in Khitan, *After three days of intense fighting, we finally pushed the Yuan army out of Shangjing. Apparently, during the cleanup afterward, my people found an ancient sword outside Fangwen Alley. They presented it to Han Weiyong.*

Duan Ling's heartbeat nearly stopped.

Fangwen Alley was right outside Qionghua House. His eyes reddened around the rims instantly, and he looked up at Zongzhen with barely suppressed grief.

Uneasiness struck Yelü Zongzhen at the sight. *Duan Ling?* he mouthed.

Duan Ling shook his head, slow and steady. A new picture of that Qixi night rose before his eyes—Li Jianhong using his final burst of strength to reach the alley, parted from him eternally by the courtyard wall standing between them.

Duan Ling gestured for him to continue.

Yelü Zongzhen hesitated, then wrote, *But I've never seen it, only heard the rumor. This sword should be in Han Weiyong's possession. I'll get it back for you, trust me.*

"Is the other blade Kublai's golden sword?" Duan Ling asked.

Although Yelü Zongzhen didn't know why Duan Ling had switched to the brush when speaking of the Guardian, he didn't mind that the topic had turned and didn't pry further. "Yes. Do you have it?" he asked.

"I did, but I lost it when I fled."

"Do you remember where you last saw it?"

Duan Ling thought for quite a while. "An herb village," he said. "Not far from Shangjing."

Yelü Zongzhen nodded. "Once I'm back, I'll send some men to search for it. If no one's picked it up, I imagine it's still there—and if it was found by any nearby villagers, as long as they didn't sell it, I'll be able to find it. If they did…then I don't know."

"You would go so far to search for it?"

"Holding that sword is one of the conditions for succeeding Kublai," said Yelü Zongzhen. "If I find it, I'll destroy it. We can't afford the emergence of a khan who could unite the Mongols against us, at least not for the next hundred years."

On this, Duan Ling agreed with him wholeheartedly. Thinking again of Batu, he sighed and nodded. But a few moments later, he said "You could give it to Borjigin. Ally your countries and swallow mine."

Yelü Zongzhen laughed. "Are you jealous?"

“Wasn’t it your people who let the Mongols in first?” Duan Ling hadn’t wanted to ask, but he found he couldn’t hold back.

“If you were to marry me,” Zongzhen said with a smile, “this wouldn’t happen. We could expel the Mongols and rule the Central Plains together. You care for the land, and I’ll care for you. We’ll usher in a new age of peace and prosperity.”

Once again, Yelü Zongzhen was teasing him. Duan Ling couldn’t tell how much was sincere and how much feigned—but he remembered hearing once that, although the Khitan people were fierce fighters, after taking up governance, they had come to love scholars almost to the point of madness. This was especially true of the imperial Yelü family.

Yelü Zongzhen loved him very much—but not in any romantic sense of the word. Seeing he wasn’t going to get any more information from him for the time being, Duan Ling bade Zongzhen goodbye and left him to think things over.

As he stepped into the hall, Duan Ling whispered to Lang Junxia, “Who ordered you to kill Zongzhen?”

“Where’s the Guardian?” Lang Junxia returned, once again answering a question with a question.

“Do you really think I’d tell you?” Duan Ling was astounded he had the gall to ask.

“Don’t let Changliu-jun find it first,” Lang Junxia cautioned him in a low voice. “Or Mu Kuangda will have nothing left to fear.”

“Even if Changliu-jun unearthed it, he’d have to hand it over to the throne,” Duan Ling whispered back, his chest suddenly roiling with anger. “Lang Junxia, what exactly is your goal?”

“The Guardian is special,” Lang Junxia replied. “Any successor of the White Tiger Sect has the right to wield it. If Changliu-jun refused to hand it over, not even your fourth uncle could do anything about it.”

Was that really the case? Lang Junxia didn’t seem to be lying to him—not in the moment at least.

With the coming of night, a strange tension settled over the courtyard. As a cold wind blew through, Lang Junxia did something unexpected: He

raised his cuffed hands and tidied Duan Ling’s lapels.

Duan Ling jerked backward, anxious for some reason, and averted his eyes. He strode ahead through the corridor as if driven by guilt, his thoughts an utter mess.

Lang Junxia hurried to catch up, silent as he followed him into the guest quarters. Back in their hall, Zheng Yan was still drinking; Duan Ling wondered if he had ever seen him sober.

Their third companion was nowhere to be found.

“Where’s Changliu-jun?” Duan Ling asked.

“He said he had some stuff to take care of,” Zheng Yan replied.

Duan Ling turned that over in his mind and realized Changliu-jun had likely gone off to guard Wang Qi. Tonight the northern wind would freeze the entire city. If Wang Qi died in the cold while they were away, then everything they’d done would be for naught.

He sighed again.

“What’s wrong?” Zheng Yan asked.

“Let’s get some sleep. I’m tired.”

“Shall I join you in bed?”

While Duan Ling flapped a hand at him, Lang Junxia stood and stepped outside. After a moment of reflection, Duan Ling called out, “Wuluohou Mu, you sleep inside.”

He genuinely couldn’t tell sometimes whether Zheng Yan was joking or really had untoward intentions—but with Lang Junxia present, Zheng Yan wouldn’t dare try and climb into bed with him… Although Duan Ling had the sense that if Zheng Yan really did invite himself in, Lang Junxia would be stuck watching.

“I would fight him to the death,” Lang Junxia promised, as if he’d read Duan Ling’s mind.

Duan Ling was struck speechless.

“What do you mean? Fight who to the death?” Zheng Yan asked, befuddled.

“Stop talking. Go to sleep,” Duan Ling said, exhausted. Too many things had happened today.

Skychaser was a swift runner. By now, assuming Wu Du was riding without rest, he should’ve reached Heishan Valley. It would take another day for him to reach Ye proper, then *another* day to get back to the valley, and one more to organize the troops for the march… Duan Ling’s thoughts slid out of focus as he sank into a deep slumber.

The next few days passed in the same manner. Everyone waited with extraordinary patience, a skill that perhaps all assassins possessed. Zheng Yan and Changliu-jun didn’t ask a single question they shouldn’t, only broaching the occasional harmless topic to poke fun at each other. Considered as a whole, it was nothing Duan Ling couldn’t suffer through—and bit by bit he learned how to kill any subject of conversation before they delved too deeply, thereby earning himself an hour of blissful peace.

On the third day, Yelü Zongzhen came to call. He cast a glance around the hall at his other three guests.

“Are you ready to go?” Duan Ling asked, following him into the courtyard.

The snow had melted, and the ground was a mess of dirty slush. The temperature had risen again, fluctuating between highs and lows; it would be another month before winter settled over the city for good.

“Yes,” Yelü Zongzhen said. “Will your man be back today?”

“Yes,” Duan Ling replied. He and Wu Du had agreed on this date. No matter what, Wu Du would be here.

“I have the Yuan army’s camp layout here,” Yelü Zongzhen said. “Take a look.”

Duan Ling rolled open the parchment Yelü Zongzhen handed him. “Where did you get this?”

“Shulü Duan drew it from memory. Tonight, you and I will dispatch soldiers to raid their camp, break through their defensive line, and flee southeast.”

“My reinforcements will be here,” Duan Ling said, pointing at Heishan Valley on the map. He and Yelü Zongzhen walked shoulder to

shoulder. “We have two thousand men lying in wait.”

“It’ll be enough,” Yelü Zongzhen assured him. “Perhaps the Mongols won’t recognize us. If we catch them off guard and outrun the pursuing soldiers, we won’t even need your reinforcements.”

“No.” Duan Ling stopped and turned to face Yelü Zongzhen. “If the enemy we’re facing is Batu, there’s no way he’ll let you go that easily.”

“If it comes down to it, you must flee back to Chen territory. I’ll stay and stall them. He doesn’t know you’re with me. There’s no need for us to go down together.”

Suddenly Duan Ling laughed.

“What are you laughing at?” Yelü Zongzhen asked, taken by surprise.

You’ve got guts, Duan Ling thought. *Are you really not at all worried that I’m working with Batu to trick you out of the city and betray you?* But for some reason, he too felt he could trust Yelü Zongzhen. Just as he wasn’t afraid Yelü Zongzhen would throw him to Batu and slip away like a cicada from its molt, Zongzhen wasn’t afraid Duan Ling would team up with Batu to stab him in the back.

In the current political climate, Liao and Chen’s fates were inexorably intertwined. An alliance built on mutual interest was much more reliable than one formed through personal ties. This was something they both understood; their friendship need not be tested any further.

“There’s something else I need you to do,” Duan Ling said. He explained his plans to Yelü Zongzhen in a whisper. Under the cover of the raid, his subordinate would be taking someone out of the city—though Duan Ling didn’t say who.

“You’ll use our escape as a diversion,” Yelü Zongzhen said. “Not bad.”

“Then are we set for tonight?” Duan Ling murmured.

With a nod from Yelü Zongzhen, Duan Ling left to make his final preparations. He sent Lang Junxia away, then relayed their plan to Changliu-jun and Zheng Yan.

“Tonight, Yuan’s forces will likely congregate outside the east gate,” Duan Ling said. He marked a line on the map and continued, “Once we

split off, two hundred men from Luoyan's city guard will charge out alongside you. We have ten battalions at our disposal—five with two hundred men and five with four hundred."

Changliu-jun was speechless, but Zheng Yan barked a laugh. "You're really something!"

Duan Ling had prepared ten separate groups to stream out of Luoyan at once so the Yuan army wouldn't be able to determine which one contained Zongzhen; they'd try to cut off their escape, only to run around in circles chasing Duan Ling's decoys.

"What if we're caught?" Changliu-jun asked.

"I won't be able to help you," Duan Ling said, shrugging.

Who was more important, Wang Qi or Zongzhen—his position as the crown prince or the alliance of two nations? Duan Ling knew the correct answer. He had planned to the best of his ability. Now it was up to fate. They could only pray luck was on their side.

Changliu-jun accepted the Khitan military tally and left. He would head to the western gate with Wang Qi before midnight and wait for the battalion to gallop out. His dealings with Duan Ling thus came to an end for the time being.

That settled, Duan Ling turned to Zheng Yan. "What should we do about Wuluohou Mu?"

"Bring him with us," Zheng Yan said. "You don't need to be afraid."

"And then what?" Duan Ling asked.

"Detain him in Ye," Zheng Yan said. "We can't let him return to the Eastern Palace. It'll rattle the crown prince if he disappears, and when the time comes, we can use that to our advantage."

"Okay." Duan Ling had thought to ask Zheng Yan if it would be too much for him to protect both him and Lang Junxia. But almost immediately, he remembered Yelü Zongzhen, with so many soldiers under his command, was also a force to be reckoned with. The soldiers were split into ten battalions to break through the Mongols' line, and Duan Ling and Zongzhen's battalion had the most skilled fighters of the bunch. With Zheng Yan there as well, there would be no safer place for him.

In all honesty, Duan Ling wished he could release Lang Junxia. But where would he go? Without Wu Du’s antidote, he was just an ordinary man. Could he possibly leave Lang Junxia to fend for himself?

Chapter 159

SENSING HIS HESITATION, Zheng Yan paused, then asked a different question: “Do you want to kill him?”

Duan Ling’s heart lurched. He said in a rush, “What use is there in that? He has to testify in court. We need him.”

Zheng Yan took a seat on the divan. “Changliu-jun’s gone, so there’s no harm in telling you this,” he said easily, stripping off his glove. “The safest choice is to kill him now. That’s one less disaster to worry about.”

Duan Ling eyed him with new caution. He’d underestimated him. Zheng Yan was more ruthless than he had realized.

“Even if you spare him, he’ll still die,” Zheng Yan said. “If you kill him here and now, he will at least die with his body intact.”

“Why do you want to take his life so badly?”

“For the sake of His Majesty,” said Zheng Yan. “If the crown prince truly is a fake, then if we don’t take care of Wuluohou Mu, the prince might become desperate enough to use him to assassinate the emperor.”

“Isn’t it enough to detain him?” Duan Ling asked. “Wu Du is the only one with the antidote. So long as Wu Du doesn’t hand it over, he can’t do anything.”

“What if he goes rogue while testifying in court?” Zheng Yan countered. “If he frames someone like Yao Fu or Xie You, do you have any measures against that?”

“No—but we can’t,” Duan Ling insisted. “This is too important. And we can’t kill him unless Wu Du agrees.”

Zheng Yan smiled. “It’s only the two of us here right now. This is between heaven and earth, you and me. Once we dispose of him, we can say he was killed by the Yuan army outside the city. No one will have any proof otherwise. It really isn’t anything to get so worked up over, Governor Wang.”

“No,” Duan Ling said at last. “I know it’s not, but still, I don’t want to kill him.”

“Why do you insist on protecting him?”

“Because some people can be spared—that’s all, Zheng Yan.”

If Zheng Yan truly intended to eliminate Lang Junxia one way or another, he wouldn’t have asked for Duan Ling’s opinion. After all, what kind of match was he for Zheng Yan? Viewed from that angle, the fact that they were even having this exchange meant Zheng Yan held him in high regard. Duan Ling retrieved Zheng Yan’s glove and looked at his bare hand with its White Tiger tattoo and inscription. He tugged the glove back onto Zheng Yan’s hand, and the assassin smiled and said no more.

Duan Ling called over Lang Junxia, who had no way of knowing that just moments ago, he’d almost been whisked away to the underworld. He stood quietly before Duan Ling, eyes on him.

“We’re leaving tonight,” Duan Ling said. He picked up Chilling Edge and unsheathed it in one smooth motion.

“Are you going to kill me now?” Lang Junxia’s voice was flat, no different than if he was asking whether it was time for dinner. Strands of his hair had come loose around his face, like he hadn’t slept well over the last few days. Duan Ling held Chilling Edge, weighing it in his hand as he and Lang Junxia gazed at each other in silence.

Does he really think I’ll kill him? Duan Ling recalled how he’d almost stabbed him on that stormy night when Lang Junxia had appeared in the courtyard of Qionghua House.

Duan Ling brought the blade down in a sharp slash.

Lang Junxia’s iron cuffs broke apart with a *clang*. Duan Ling handed him his sword. “Tonight, you’ll follow us. If you don’t want to die, don’t even think about trying to flee.”

Lang Junxia accepted the hilt, turned from him, and walked out.

Zheng Yan stood on the other side of the mirror, tidying his robes. Duan Ling waited, on edge, as the daylight gradually faded.

A melody floated in through the door.

Lang Junxia always carried a flute with him, embedded in the scabbard of his Chilling Edge. Duan Ling thought back to the imperial examinations and wondered if he'd played "Joyful Reunion" in the palace. He wondered, too, how many times Cai Yan had heard it by now.

Zheng Yan packed his bag and sat down in the corner. He'd changed into a set of black stealth robes to more easily blend into the darkness once they set out.

"You should get some sleep," Zheng Yan said.

Hearing "Joyful Reunion" played again carried Duan Ling back to a time long past, and he sank swiftly into sleep.

Deep in the night, an icy hand touched his cheek.

"Wake up," Wu Du said.

Duan Ling thought he was dreaming, still asleep, until warm lips brushed his own. His eyes snapped open—it really was Wu Du!

Eyes wide with disbelief, Duan Ling gazed up at him; Wu Du, clad in his stealth robes, offered him a tired smile. "It's snowing outside," Wu Du murmured. "Dress warmly."

"How did you get back here?" Duan Ling asked in shock.

"I gave Qin Long command of the army and told him to stay in Heishan Valley," Wu Du said quietly. Duan Ling reached for his hand, and he twitched it away. "I'm freezing. Don't touch."

He sat on the edge of the bed, dressed in black from head to toe. Duan Ling couldn't imagine how he'd managed to sneak back into the city, but his body was running hot under his damp martial robes. Duan Ling tugged him closer, kissing him without another word.

Wu Du was impatient by nature. He pulled back after a second and said, "I guessed you were still in the city—mmm."

Duan Ling had kissed him again, refusing to let him go.

"All right, all right." Wu Du finally coaxed him to stop before his own will crumbled. "We'll finish this when the work is done. Get up; let's go."

"Where are the soldiers?" Duan Ling asked.

“Waiting outside,” replied Wu Du. “I had to see you, or I wouldn’t have been able to stop worrying.”

“How many people did you bring in with you?” Duan Ling asked.

“Just me. I came through the mountain out back and almost fell down it. The snow hasn’t melted yet; I had to wade through all that slush.”

Only then did Duan Ling notice that Wu Du’s elbow was scraped raw. He hurried to apply some herbal medicine to it. When he was done, Wu Du took his hand. “Come on.”

As they exited the hall, Wu Du swept an eye over their surroundings. “Zheng Yan already took Wuluohou Mu to the east gate to wait for us.”

The city guard headquarters had been completely cleared out while Duan Ling slept. When he and Wu Du reached the main gates, a guard was waiting outside. “Your Excellency, His Majesty requests you meet him at the east gate.”

Duan Ling peered through the helmet and recognized Shulü Duan.

Another thought occurred to Duan Ling. He instructed, “Go fetch three more sets of armor and wait for us outside the east gate.”

Yelü Zongzhen’s army had gathered outside the east gate in the darkness, their torches unlit. Two battalions, hundreds of soldiers combined, awaited them—one in charge of attracting the Mongols’ attention, and the other assigned to accompany Yelü Zongzhen away from the city. Zheng Yan and Lang Junxia both waited atop a horse. Wu Du and Duan Ling cantered over to them on Skychaser.

It was silent. Not a single one of the soldiers said a word, eyes following the two men on Skychaser’s back. Yelü Zongzhen, dressed in an ordinary soldier’s leather armor, raised a hand toward Duan Ling and waved.

Wu Du ignored him, tugging Skychaser’s reins so the horse slowly wheeled around. One arm looped around Wu Du’s waist, Duan Ling leaned over and waved back at Zongzhen, who rode over and stopped in front of Wu Du and Duan Ling.

“Brave soldier, on behalf of the Khitan people, I thank you for rescuing us,” he said in Khitan.

Wu Du looked thoughtful; he turned to Duan Ling and raised a brow, encouraging him to respond.

Duan Ling was instantly nervous, but Yelü Zongzhen merely smiled and continued in Khitan, “If I survive and successfully return to Zhongjing, I promise you this: As long as I live, what happened at Shangzi will never be repeated, and the Khitan army will not take one step across the Xun River. As a mark of our gratitude for your assistance today, we shall send three thousand taels of gold, ten thousand taels of silver, ten thousand dan of flour, and two thousand fine horses to your capital.”

After Duan Ling translated his declaration, even Wu Du appeared moved. “Fine, then. Let’s hear him out,” he said in his usual disinterested manner.

Yelü Zongzhen’s subordinates hurried forward, each holding a piece of parchment. They presented the first to Zongzhen and the second to Wu Du.

Duan Ling was shocked speechless. Sitting before him, Wu Du was equally stunned.

Never had they predicted that Yelü Zongzhen would be willing to sign a formal treaty with them. It had plainly been prepared earlier that night—the ink had yet to fully dry. Both copies were written in Khitan with matching Han script, proclaiming that the Liao Empire would not invade Hebei. As Hejian’s commandant, Wu Du shouldn’t have had the authority to treat directly with the Liao emperor—but in order to express his heartfelt gratitude, Zongzhen had gone so far as to break custom. If Wu Du declined now, it would be a grave insult.

Duan Ling glanced at him.

“Interesting,” Wu Du said, a smile quirking his lips.

Zongzhen’s subordinate held up a vermilion pad. Wu Du went quiet for a moment. He pressed his thumb down on the pad, then onto the parchment. “We thank you most sincerely,” Wu Du said.

In the ordinary course of things, a mere commandant like Wu Du couldn't have signed a treaty on behalf of the whole Chen Empire. But Chen was a nation established on military might, and took as law the maxim that a general in a far-off land may disregard the sovereign's orders. This law applied to any military official higher than the level of governor, and gave them the authority to discuss all affairs save for three with foreign nations: land cessation, debt repayment, and marriage pacts.

Zongzhen left his own fingerprint on each copy. His subordinate took the two pieces of parchment, tied them with a golden sash, and presented one to Wu Du—who handed it to Duan Ling—and the other to Zongzhen.

"This is Shulü Duan," Zongzhen said, now addressing Duan Ling. "He is a cousin from my grandmother's clan. For almost a hundred years, the Shulü family has accompanied my Yelü Clan—and now Shulü Duan will follow and attend to you."

"I…" Duan Ling sputtered, ready to politely demur.

Wu Du tilted his head. He couldn't interject without damaging the ties being built between the two nations, but the look he gave Duan Ling said enough.

Duan Ling nodded slightly, deeply moved.

"Shulü Duan," Yelü Zongzhen said, calling him over.

He and Duan Ling each dismounted their horses, and Shulü Duan went down on one knee before Duan Ling to swear his loyalty. Duan Ling quickly helped him stand.

"You must treat him as you treat me," Yelü Zongzhen told Shulü Duan.

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Yelü Zongzhen met Duan Ling's eyes again. "You saved his life outside the city," he said. "When I asked him to do this, he agreed of his own will, but you must treat him as you treat me too. He's saved my life too many times to count. He grew up with me; he is my dearest friend."

And yet Yelü Zongzhen was handing a man like this over to Duan Ling in the same manner as giving a chest of gold. Duan Ling felt he couldn't accept such a gift—yet how could he decline? He stepped forward

and wrapped Yelü Zongzhen in a firm embrace. The two of them squeezed each other tight.

“Take care,” Duan Ling said.

After tonight, they would be separated by over a thousand miles. Yelü Zongzhen could have saved all these declarations until they’d broken through the siege; that he’d chosen to issue them now meant he’d made his own preparations in case their plans failed.

The guards brought them the three suits of armor Duan Ling had requested. Duan Ling instructed Wu Du to put one on, but when the guard came to Zheng Yan, he waved his hand to refuse. Duan Ling pointed at Lang Junxia, silently instructing him to wear it as protection against stray arrows.

The gatekeepers braced for the coming attack, while Yelü Zongzhen’s cadre of guards, Duan Ling, and the three assassins waited at the back of the troops.

Wu Du turned back to whisper to Duan Ling, “The barbarian gifted you his best friend. Aren’t you going to give him something in return?”

“What would I give? We’re so poor you can hear our coins rattling in our purses.”

Wu Du leaned closer. “Give him Wuluohou Mu. He can go back to Liao and serve the emperor well in his homeland; no need to ever send him back.”

Duan Ling was at a loss. Was now the time to make jokes?

“In a moment, when we ride out, remember to hold on tight,” Wu Du added.

Duan Ling wrapped his arms securely around his waist, resting his cheek on Wu Du’s shoulder. He could feel the power contained in that warm, broad back.

“I didn’t mean now,” Wu Du whispered.

“Be careful. Don’t faint on me like last time.”

Wu Du scoffed. “Wasn’t that all your fault?”

Character Guide and Glossary

Character Guide and Glossary

Character and Name Guide

HISTORICAL PERIOD

Joyful Reunion takes place in a fictional historical setting. It takes inspiration from empires such as the Liao dynasty (916–1125 AD), the Mongol horde prior to the establishment of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368 AD), and the Chen dynasty (557–589 AD); and from peoples such as the Xianbei and the Tangut, who existed throughout Chinese history.

As such, many of the characters in Joyful Reunion are fictionalized versions of historical figures, including the Yelü imperial family of Liao, Kublai Khan, Ögedei, and Borjigin Batu. Other characters, such as the four great assassins and the Li imperial family of Southern Chen, are created for the sake of the story.

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

DUAN LING 段岭: The crown prince of Southern Chen, Li Ruo (李若). Li Jianhong's only son and the heir to the Chen Empire.

WU DU 武独: One of the Four Great Assassins. A poison master who began to work for Mu Kuangda after the deaths of his first two masters, Zhao Kui and Li Jianhong.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

SOUTHERN CHEN

BIAN LINGBAI 边令白: The Commander of Defense at Tong Pass.

CAI YAN 蔡闫: One of Duan Ling's former schoolmates from Shangjing. A boy of Khitan and Han descent who assumed the role of the lost crown prince of Southern Chen. As the fake crown prince, he goes by the name Li Rong.

CHANGLIU-JUN 昌流君: One of the Four Great Assassins. Heavily favored by Mu Kuangda.

CHANG PIN 长聘: Mu Kuangda's chief strategist.

FEI HONGDE 费宏德: Chang Pin's shishu. An elderly Tangut advisor who met Duan Ling at Tong Pass.

HAN BIN 韩滨: Tiger General who guards Yubi Pass. Betrayed Li Jianhong at Jiangjun Ridge.

FENG DUO 冯铎: Former commander of Southern Chen's shadow squad. Currently a guest advisor of the crown prince.

HUANG JIAN 黄坚: A fellow student of the prime minister's manor. Duan Ling and Mu Qing's shixiong.

LANG JUNXIA 郎俊侠: One of the Four Great Assassins. Also known as the Nameless Assassin and by his Xianbei name, Wuluohou Mu (乌洛侯穆).

LI JIANHONG 李渐鸿: The late emperor of Southern Chen, posthumously known as Emperor Wulie. Duan Ling's father.

LI YANQIU 李衍秋: The emperor of Southern Chen. Duan Ling's fourth uncle.

LIN YUNQI 林运齐: A subordinate of Mu Kuangda who joins Duan Ling in Ye.

MU JINZHI 牧锦之: Mu Kuangda's younger sister and the empress of Southern Chen.

MU KUANGDA 牧旷达: The prime minister of Southern Chen.

MU QING 牧磬: Mu Kuangda's son and Duan Ling's study companion in the prime minister's manor.

PRINCESS DUANPING 端平公主: A princess of Southern Chen. Duan Ling's fifth aunt.

QIN LONG 秦泷: Lieutenant of the Hejian city garrison.

QIN XUGUANG 秦旭光: Duan Ling's fellow imperial examinee, the son of Hui Prefecture's magistrate.

SHI QI 施戚: A former subordinate of Zhao Kui who joins Duan Ling in Ye.

SU FA 苏阀: The Minister of Revenue of Southern Chen. A man from the prominent Su Clan of Jiangnan.

SUN TING 孙廷: A soldier from Ye who delivers the news of the Mongols' attack to Jiang Prefectural City.

WANG ZHENG 王钲: Former member of the Northern Expedition Army who joins Duan Ling in Ye.

WANLIFU 万里伏: An ancient Han swordsman from the White Tiger Sect of Xichuan who retrieved all the pieces of the nameless sword and reforged it into the Guardian of the Realm.

WU ZUN 吴遵: One of the Grand Secretaries of Southern Chen. A man from the prominent Wu Clan of Jiangnan.

XIE YOU 谢宥: The commander of the Black-Plated Army of Jiang Prefecture and Defender-General of the State.

YAO FU 姚复: The Marquis of Huaiyin and a prince consort of Southern Chen. Princess Duanping's husband.

YAO JING 姚静: Yao Zheng's younger cousin, sent to Tong Pass by the Marquis of Huaiyin for a marriage arrangement with Western Liang.

YAO ZHENG 姚筝: Commandery Princess Congping of Southern Chen, the daughter of Princess Duanping and the Marquis of Huaiyin.

YAN DI 严狄: A former subordinate of Zhao Kui who joins Duan Ling in Ye.

ZENG YONGNUO 曾永诺: Duan Ling's fellow imperial examinee, born to a salt merchant family in Jiangnan.

ZHAO KUI 赵奎: Formerly the Grand General of Southern Chen and Wu Du's former master. Deceased.

ZHAO XUELI 赵薛立: The Minister of Works of Southern Chen.

ZHENG LI 郑隶: New governor of Tong Pass.

ZHENG YAN 郑彦: One of the Four Great Assassins. He is renowned for his skills in the kitchen.

LIAO

CAI YE 蔡邺: Cai Yan and Cai Wen's father, once a great scholar of the Central Plains. Deceased.

MADAM DUAN 段夫人: Duan Ling's maternal aunt in Runan.

DUAN XIAOWAN 段小婉: Duan Ling's mother, a commoner. Deceased.

EMPRESS DOWAGER XIAO 萧太后: Acting regent for the Liao Empire.

HAN WEIYONG 韩唯庸: The chief of the Liao Empire's Southern Court, and the sole Han minister. The Southern Court's capital of Zhongjing is under his jurisdiction.

SHULÜ DUAN 述律端: Yelü Zongzhen's trusted guard.

WANG QI 王七: A wonton seller from Runan.

XUNCHUN 寻春: The madam and owner of Qionghua House in Shangjing. Wu Du's shijie. Deceased.

YELÜ DASHI 耶律大石: The former Great Prince of the Northern Court and the chief of the Liao Empire's Northern Court. Killed defending Shangjing from the second Mongol invasion.

YELÜ ZONGZHEN 耶律宗真: The current emperor of Liao.

WESTERN LIANG

HELIAN BO 赫连博: One of Duan Ling's former schoolmates in Shangjing, a Tangut royal with a stutter.

HELIAN DA 赫连达: Helian Bo's uncle, the Grand Preceptor of Western Liang.

SHANG LEGUAN 赏乐官: Son of a high-ranking official in Western Liang.

YUAN

AMUGU 阿木古: The strongest warrior of the Yuan Empire.

BORJIGIN BATU 布儿赤金拔都: A Mongolian boy who was one of Duan Ling's schoolmates in Shangjing. He is currently vying for the throne in Yuan along with his father, Kuchi.

BORJIGIN KUCHI 布儿赤金奇赤: Batu's father.

CHAGATAI 察合台: Batu's uncle and Kublai's second son.

CHAGHAN 查罕: Ögedei's subordinate and trusted aide.

KHATANBAATAR 哈丹巴特尔: An emissary of Yuan. The last disciple of Nayantuo and one of the top assassins of the Western Regions.

ÖGEDEI 窝阔台: A Mongolian general and Kublai's third son.

TOLUI 拖雷: Batu's uncle and Kublai's fourth son.

OTHER

HELAN JIE 贺兰羯: A dangerous assassin with an iron hook for a hand.

MASTER KONGMING 空明法师: A bad-tempered old monk who presided over the Northern Temple. His sect once possessed the sword Ender of the Profane before it was stolen by his traitorous shidi.

MASTER WANGBEI 忘悲大师: Master Kongming and Helan Jie's master.

MISTRESS FEILIAN 费连氏: An elderly Xianbei lady from the same tribe as Lang Junxia. Her daughter was once betrothed to him.

NAYANTUO 那延陀: The former number one assassin of the Western Regions who established the Yulin Sword Sect. He was killed by Li

Jianhong.

Name Guide

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

DA-: A prefix meaning “big” or “elder,” which can be added before titles for elders, like “dage” or “dajie,” or before a name.

LAO-: A prefix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning “little” or “younger,” which can be added before names or titles for juniors like “xiaodi.” Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

-ER: Affectionate diminutive. A suffix meaning “son” or “child.” Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

Family

DI/DIDI: A word meaning “younger brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated (usually younger) male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

GE/GEGE: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning “elder sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

TANGGE: A word meaning “elder paternal male cousin.”

TANGJIE: A word meaning “elder paternal female cousin.”

XIONG: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

XIONGDI: A word meaning “brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

Martial Arts and Tutelage

SHIBO: One’s shifu’s older male peer.

SHIDI/SHIMEI: One’s younger peerage. Shidi is one’s younger brother and Shimei is one’s younger sister.

SHIFU: One’s trade teacher or master. Otherwise known as the Teacher-Father.

SHINIANG: Shifu’s wife. Otherwise known as the Teacher-Mother.

SHISHU: One’s shifu’s younger male peer.

SHIXIONG/SHIJIE: One’s older peerage. Shixiong is one’s older brother and Shijie is one’s older sister.

SHIZHI: One’s peer’s male disciple.

Other

GONGZI: Young man from an affluent household.

LAOYE: A title for the head of a household.

-QING: A term of familiar address from an emperor toward one of his ministers.

SHAOYE: Young master.

GLOSSARY

FOUR BOOKS AND FIVE CLASSICS: The canon of Confucian texts that became central to both primary education and the imperial examinations. The Four Books are: *The Analects*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *Great Learning*, and *Mengzi*. The Five Classics are: *The Book of Songs*, *The Book of Documents*, *The Book of Rites*, *The Book of Changes (I-Ching)*, and *The Spring and Autumn Annals.*

GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS: Geographical regions are informal, nonadministrative regions that refer to a specific area in relation to a major landmark, such as a river or a pass, and will usually have a cardinal direction as a suffix:

· dong: area east of the landmark

· xi: area west of the landmark

· nan: area south of the landmark

· bei: area north of the landmark

· zhong: central, or the area in between two major landmarks.

For example, Jiangnan, “south of the river,” refers to the region south of the Yangtze River, and Guanxi, “west of the pass,” refers to the region west of Tong Pass.

IMPERIAL STATE EXAM: A civil service examination system for selecting candidates for state bureaucracy. Achievements in civil service and scholarship brought the highest prestige for any citizen, regardless of background. There were several levels to the imperial examinations:

PROVINCIAL EXAM: This examination, the lowest level, tested candidates at the provincial level.

METROPOLITAN EXAM: The second stage of the imperial examination took place within the imperial capital every three years, in the spring

following the provincial examination. Those who passed earned the title of **gongshi**.

PALACE EXAM: The final stage of the imperial examination took place inside the imperial palace, and was overseen by the emperor himself. Those who passed earned the title of **jinshi** and were qualified to become officials by imperial appointment. The first-, second-, and third-ranked candidates are bestowed the titles of zhuangyuan, bangyan, and tanhua, respectively.

GRACE EXAM: The name given to metropolitan and palace exams that took place outside the normal three-year cycle by special grace of the emperor.

STUDENT REFERRAL: A student wishing to sit the metropolitan exam required the referral or recommendation of a current or former government official. The student would therefore become a disciple under the house of the official who recommended him.

JIANGHU: A staple of wuxia and xianxia, the jianghu (江湖 / "rivers and lakes") describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

LAWFUL AND COMMON-BORN RELATIONSHIPS: Upper-class men in ancient China often took multiple wives. Only one would be the official wife, and her lawful sons would take precedence over the common sons of the concubines. Sons of lawful birth were prioritized in matters of inheritance. They also had higher social status and often received better treatment compared to the common sons born to concubines or mistresses.

OFFICIALS AND RANK SYSTEM: Civil and military officials were classified in nine hierarchic ranks, with the first rank being the highest. Their salaries ranged according to their rank. The imperial examination was

one path to becoming a court official, the other being referral by someone in a position of power, such as a noble, a eunuch, or another official.

QIXI FESTIVAL: Qixi is known as the Crafter's Festival, a celebration of deft hands that takes place on the seventh day of the seventh month. Legend has it that a celestial maiden, the weaver girl, came to earth and married a cowherd. Despite wanting to stay on earth with him and their children, she was forced to return to heaven by her father, the Jade Emperor. The cowherd tried to follow her on an oxcart but was stopped at the Milky Way, a silver river cutting through the sky that separated the two lovers. On a single day of the year, Qixi, magpies swarm together and create a bridge that allows the cowherd and the weaver to reunite. Thus, Qixi is also known as a celebration of romantic love.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE (TCM): A holistic system of medicine used throughout most of Chinese history. Herbal and animal byproducts were boiled into decoctions, ground up and baked into pills for ingestion, or applied as poultices to treat injuries.

UNITS OF MEASUREMENT:

LI (里): A traditional unit of length equal to approximately 500 meters or 1,640 feet.

DAN (石): A dry measure for grain equal to approximately 100 liters.

DOU (斗): A dry measure for grain equal to one-tenth of a dan.

About the Author

Fei Tian Ye Xiang (Arise Zhang) is a Chinese novelist who has been active since 2008. A romantic who crafts fantasy worlds suffused with eastern mythology, he has published a number of books in places such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and Germany. Many of his works, including *Legend of Exorcism* and *Dinghai Fusheng Records*, have received manhua and popular animated adaptations. He considers writing to be the act of bringing boundless adventure to the mundane life of the real world, allowing his readers to follow his characters in exploring the endless possibilities of time and space. He hopes every world will leave his readers with everlasting memories.

Footnotes

Chapter 123

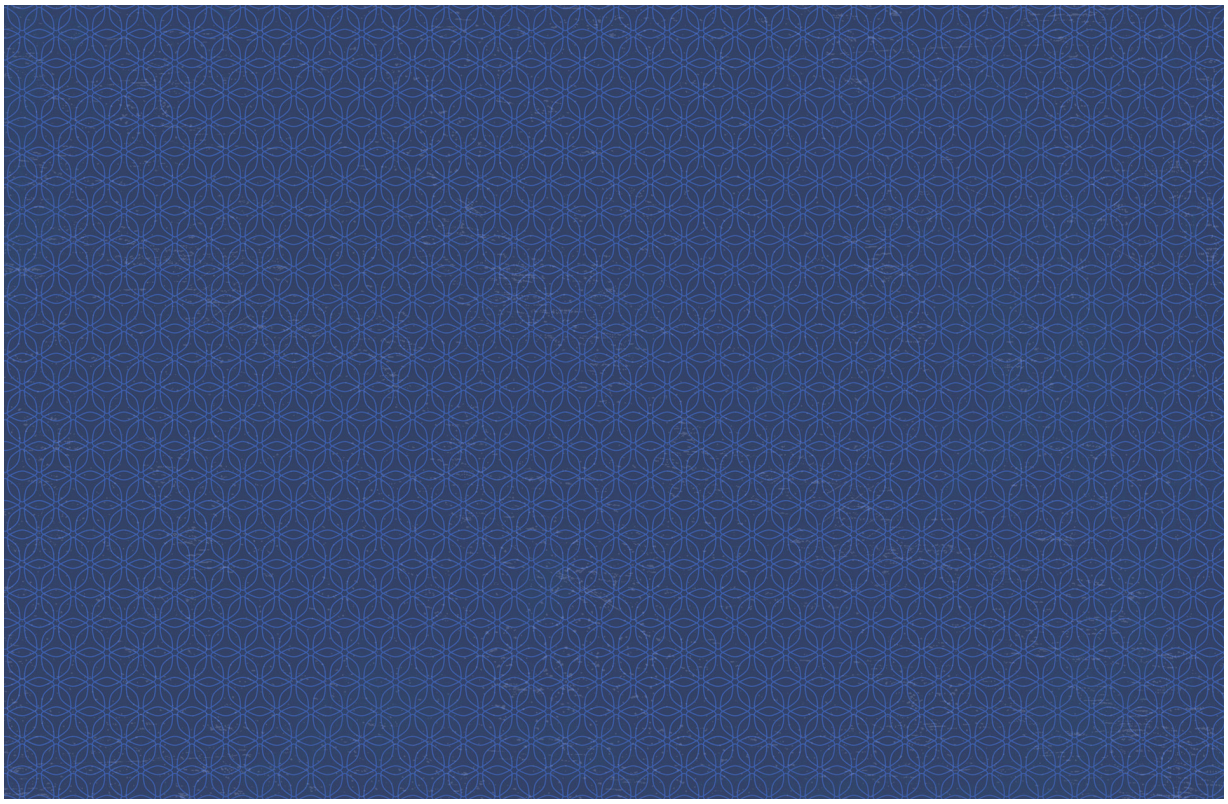
[1] Lines from “Three Elegies in Imitation of Funeral Songs” by fifth-century poet Tao Yuanming.

Chapter 127

[2] Lines from “Water Melody” by Song dynasty poet Su Shi.

Chapter 128

[3] A classic Song dynasty text consisting of common family names.



Old Friends and New Enemies

Fresh from the imperial examinations, Duan Ling volunteers to journey to the northern city of Ye, where the empire's border is under threat of a Mongol invasion. Accompanying him is Wu Du, tasked with rebuilding the city's ragtag garrison into a force capable of holding Ye through the winter. When Duan Ling arrives, however, he discovers that the Mongol army is led by none other than his childhood friend, Borjigin Batu. The grown-up Batu is nothing like the boy Duan Ling remembers—and now, to prove himself to his own people, Batu must capture the very city Duan Ling has sworn to defend.

While Duan Ling and Wu Du brace for Batu's attack, back in the capital, suspicions mount around the false crown prince. As the empire's most feared assassins vanish from the capital one after another, more than one person begins to wonder: What deadly secret could draw all Four Great Assassins to the north?

FOR MATURE READERS

A Boys' Love epic from the acclaimed author of *Legend of Exorcism* and *Dinghai Fusheng Records!*

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